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Duke Despard, THE GAMBLER DUELIST;

OR,

THE LADY OF LUCK.

BY DR. NOEL DUNBAR,

AUTHOR OF "THE TRAMP SHADOWER," "JULE,
THE JEWESS," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TURN OF A CARD.

A NIGHT of intense darkness and storm, the winds howling about the piazzas and gables of a grand old Southern mansion, sighing mournfully through the pines, and the waters of the mighty Mississippi beating against the low banks like a miniature surf.

A broad avenue of Lombardy poplars, swaying gracefully under the pressure of the winds, led from the highway, following the winding of the river, up to the mansion grounds, into which a one-time massive, but now tumble-down gateway led.

A single light gleamed within the mansion, coming from a window in one wing, and all the rest was cast in gloom.

Hard against the window-panes pattered the huge rain-drops, yet disturbing not three persons who were within.

Two of these sat at a table in the center of the room, and above them hung a swinging lamp, which cast its rays brightly down upon their faces.

The third was a negro, and he half-crouched, half-reclined by the chimney-corner, though not a few smoldering logs were upon the hearth.

The two at the table were gambling, for cards were in their hands, a pile of money was before one of the players, with a few slips of paper with writing thereon, and a pen and ink were at one side.

One of the players was a man of majestic presence, with a massive frame, silver hair and mustache, and a face that was noble in expression, stern and resolute.

He was dressed in the free-and-easy manner of the Southern planter, and was just what he looked, a gentleman of good lineage and the master of Idlerest Plantation.

His companion was a young man, yet with one of those indescribable faces that caused him to look as though he had lived ten years longer than the twenty-six which he counted as his own.

His face was a study for an artist, a philosopher and even a casual observer, for it might have been carved from marble, for all the expression that rested upon it when the eyes were not raised; but let one meet his glance and his whole countenance seemed to quiver with feeling the most intense.

His eyes were large, almond-shaped, black as night, with the lashes upon the upper and lower lids so dark and long they seemed to have been penciled.

His complexion was as pure as a woman's, somewhat bronzed by exposure, yet pale, while his firm mouth was half-hidden beneath a long silken mustache of chestnut hue.

His hair was lighter than his mustache, almost blonde in fact, and worn long and waving, giving him a look of effeminacy.

His form was willowy, tall, athletic, and his clothes, which were rather "flashy," fitted him perfectly.

In a black silk scarf he wore an enormous ruby that shone with great brilliancy, sending forth crimson rays in all directions.

Upon the little finger of his left hand was another ruby, even larger than the one in his scarf, and both were gems of rare value.

In his spotless shirt-cuffs, linked together by gold chains, were ruby buttons, and a massive chain, formed of links, studded with the same precious stones, which gave it the appearance of being stained with blood, encircled his neck and was attached to a watch in his vest pocket.

His hands were small and shapely, and he shuffled the cards like one who had been accustomed to such work and was an expert with the treacherous little pasteboard playthings.

"Fortune is against you to-night, Doctor Chetwynd," said the young man with a smile, as he took up a slip of paper and placed it with others by his elbow.

"Against me, Duke Despard? Did you ever know fortune to favor me in a game with you?" was the low, but bitter response.

"I have known you to win thousands at a time from me, Doctor Chetwynd."

"Yes, and lose tens of thousands at another."

"No, I am fated to ruin myself, and beggar my boy, for if I bet you again, Duke Despard, it will be to risk my last dollar upon the turn of a card."

"Then I beg of you to play no more, for you may lose," was the earnest reply.

The planter looked the speaker straight in the face, and said thoughtfully:

"You are a strange man, Duke Despard, and one I cannot understand, for I like you, in spite of the fact that in the past year you have won from me a fortune, in money, plantation and slaves. Another note of ten thousand and I will not be worth a dollar," was the sad response.

"Then keep what you have, Doctor Chetwynd, and do not wager your last dollar."

"Despard, you are a gambler by profession, and yet a gentleman withal, I frankly admit. Men call you the Ruby King, and say you are a dangerous, desperate man, while also they say you are a cheat—"

"They say it behind my back, Doctor Chetwynd," was the calm reply.

"Yes, I admit it; but I have found you a gentleman, as far as I know you, in the many times we have played together on the river-boats and at New Orleans. I have lost my all, nearly, to you, but it has been my ill-fortune to lose, your good luck to win."

"I am looking for my son home from sea very soon, and he expects not to find that I have gambled away his inheritance, and I shall make one more effort to win it back again, for I might as well lose all now, or risk all, to get all back again."

The gambler took out his watch and said:

"You said the Natchez was due at your landing about twelve, did you not, Doctor Chetwynd?"

"Yes, but she may be delayed by the storm to-night."

"It is now half-past eleven."

"Time to play one more game, sir, before the steamboat arrives, if you must go to-night."

"Yes, I must go, for I have paid you quite a lengthy visit, doctor, and have been most hospitably entertained the week I have been with you."

"I am glad you have enjoyed it. Despard, but it was half selfishness that made me urge it, when we came up the river together, as I had just had a letter from Don saying to expect him home during the month, and I hoped to win back from you at least half of my losses the past year or more."

"And you have failed?"

"Yes, but I beg you for another chance."

"If you will have it so; but we have but a few minutes for the game, as the boat must soon be here."

"If I win, I shall go with you, and we can continue our game on the steamer; but if I lose, I must remain here with my bitter grief and remorse."

"Let us play, sir, and, as I have won heavily from you, Doctor Chetwynd, I will wager ten to one against your note of hand, secured by your plantation here."

"I ask no favors, Despard, and we will bet on even terms."

"My money, slaves and other plantation you have now; but I now give you my note for ten thousand against this place—Idlerest."

"I accept it, sir, so let us play," was the calm reply, and the cards were dealt, the game begun.

The negro at the hearthside appeared to sleep serenely, and, excepting the roar of the storm without, no sound was heard to break the stillness.

"Lord be merciful! I am a beggar!"

The cry broke from the lips of Doctor Chetwynd, the planter, and he buried his face in his hands, while Duke Despard arose, quietly put the slips of paper in his pocketbook, and stood gazing one instant at the man who had wrecked himself upon the turn of a card.

"Not so bad as that, I hope, Doctor Chetwynd, for, if so, accept a loan from me until you get upon your feet once more."

"No, Despard; I am not one to ask favors, or accept them unasked. I am a beggar, and that ends it; but, hark! there is the whistle of the Natchez."

And the hoarse, deep whistle of the steamer was borne along on the fierce winds.

"Yes, I must be off. Good-by; and I hope soon to see you again."

"Come, Kit; get up and take Mr. Despard's sachel to the boat."

And Doctor Chetwynd spoke with the utmost calmness, while the negro sprung to his feet.

With a grasp of the planter's hand, Duke Despard drew his overcoat on and, accompanied by the negro, went forth into the tempest and darkness.

Hastening through the ruined gateway the two walked rapidly down the avenue, lined with the graceful poplars, and soon reached the little rustic cabin by the river-bank.

Out upon the storm-swept waters was visible the majestic steamboat, ablaze with lights, and with pine torches forward, showing the group of negro deck-hands, awaiting to run out the huge gang-plank, and, in spite of the driving rain, singing a river song in a full, rich chorus.

As the steamer touched the bank Duke Despard slipped a gold-piece into the hand of Kit, and seizing his sachel ran on board, just as a form enveloped in a military cloak hastened across the gang-plank shoreward.

"Donald Chetwynd, as I live! Well, he

comes back to find himself a beggar, and, as such, he can never marry Fidèle Faxon."

With these words Duke Despard ascended to the brilliantly lighted cabin of the boat, leaving the heir of Idlerest Plantation facing the fierce storm as he went toward the mansion which had been the home of the Chetwynds for four generations.

CHAPTER II.

THE SAILOR'S RETURN.

THE man in the military cloak who went ashore at the Idlerest Landing hardly observed the muffled form that passed him on the gang-plank.

As he felt the fury of the storm he drew his cloak more closely around him and ascended to the little cabin on the bank, where he beheld Kit, lantern in hand.

"Ho, Kit! Have you no welcome for me?" cried the man, as he advanced to the door of the cabin and confronted the negro, who was busy watching the steamer and had not observed his approach.

"Lordy! Master Don, is this indeed you? Welcome home, sir; welcome home!"

And their hands grasped in friendly greeting.

"Thank you, Kit; but how is my father?"

"Well, sir, but not expecting you so soon but here comes your trunk, and I'll carry it up to the house."

And Kit took upon his broad shoulders the trunk which a deck-hand just then brought up the river-bank.

The steamer now swung off from the shore, and after gazing an instant at the picturesque, lurid scene, and listening to the chorus of the crew, Donald Chetwynd turned to depart saying to the negro, who did not seem to feel the weight of the trunk:

"A passenger went on board from here, Kit?"

"Yes, Master Don, it was that gambler they call the Ruby King."

"Why, what was he doing at Idlerest?"

"Master and he have gotten awful thick of late, sir, and he's been on a visit for a week past."

"My father the friend of that fellow, Kit?"

"Yes, Master Don, and I guess it's for no good, sir, for master has been losing money awful, and the plantation has run down, the house looks mighty bad, for want of paint and fixing up, and things don't go as they did two years ago; but, forgive me, Master Don, I wanted you to know before you saw your father, sir."

"I thank you, Kit, for what you have told me, though it grieves me deeply to know that my father has been gambling; but I hope he has not lost much, and now I am home all will go well, for I have resigned my lieutenancy in the navy and come home to live."

"Oh, Master Don, you have given up your sea life, sir, when master said only the other day he expected you would be a commodore soon."

"Ah, no, Kit; it is a long jump from a lieutenant to a commodore, and I am anxious to be at home with father, and so I resigned my commission; but the gate seems to be broken down, Kit?"

"Ah, Master Donald, the whole place has been going to wreck, sir, for more than a year past, and—but here we are, sir, and you will soon know all about it."

They ascended the piazza steps as Kit spoke, and Don Chetwynd stepped forward and opened the door leading into the broad and spacious hallway, which was but dimly lighted.

A door ajar led into the sitting-room on the right, where Doctor Chetwynd and Duke Despard had been playing, and Kit having built up the fire before he went out, a bright blaze illumined the room, dimming the lamplight.

"I'll take your trunk right to your room, sir," said Kit, continuing on down the hall, while Don Chetwynd threw open the door and stepping into the room said pleasantly:

"Home again, father!"

The lamp burned brightly, the logs on the hearth cracked cheerily, but there came no response from the planter, no greeting to the son who had returned after a long absence.

And yet, Doctor Chetwynd was in the room, seated where the gambler had left him, his head bowed upon his arms, which rested upon the table before him.

"Poor father! he is asleep, utterly worn out as he is, and prostrated by his misfortunes. But, I will cheer him up now, and all will be well," and stepping quickly forward Don Chetwynd said cheerily:

"Come, father, have you no welcome for me?"

Still no response; and the young sailor was about to lay his hand upon the shoulder of his father and awaken him, when he uttered a cry of horror, as he saw that in his right hand he grasped a pistol, and that a tiny stream of blood was forming a pool upon the table by the bowed head.

"God above pity him! He has taken his own life!"

So groaned the son, and he sunk down upon his knees by the side of the form he loved so well, just as Kit came into the room, alarmed by the cry of his young master.

"Kit, my father is dead! He has taken his own life."

Kit fairly reeled at the words, but with a groan of anguish, for he had dearly loved his master, he sprang to his side and throwing open his coat, as he half-raised him from the table, placed his hand upon his heart.

"Dead, sir! yes, he is dead! Oh, master, my poor, poor master!"

Don Chetwynd now became perfectly calm, and took the weapon of death from the rapidly stiffening fingers.

It was a long, graceful weapon, single-barreled, mounted with gold and a very beautiful weapon, and of the kind known in the South as a dueling-pistol.

Upon the table lay an envelope, sealed and addressed, and having placed his father's body upon the sofa, and bade Kit go and summon some of the house servants, Don Chetwynd took up the letter and saw that it was addressed as follows:

"Kit, keep this letter and give it into the hands of my son Donald."

"My poor, poor father," murmured Donald, as he broke the seal, and throwing himself into the chair, where his father had killed himself, read the message he had left for him.

It was written in a bold hand, without a tremor in the hastily-penned lines and was as follows:

"IDLEREST PLANTATION,
Midnight."

"MY SON DONALD:—It is hard indeed for a father to write to a son that he has brought ruin, disgrace, beggary upon him; but as I will be in my grave when your eyes fall upon these lines, you will forgive me and not curse me."

"The truth is soon told, Donald, and it reflects only infamy upon me, for I was tempted to gamble, to meet losses through a failure of the crops, and all has gone on the turn of a card, until now I leave you with a heritage that is of no value, stained with my crime of gambling away all that I could call my own, and dishonored, as a legacy from a suicidal father."

"I know that you have certain moneys in bank, and I beg you to redeem from Duke Despard, the Ruby King, this plantation of Idlerest, and a few of the old house servants who have been so faithful to us in the past."

"Do not, I beg of you, my son, let the land that holds the graves of your forefathers go out of your possession, though the entreaty comes from your father who has just gambled all away."

"See Despard, and though it takes all you have, pay him, and let all remain as it is for my sake, and forgive the blighted heritage left you by

"Your unhappy

"FATHER."

"My poor, poor father! could you but have lived a few short moments more and stayed your desperate act, you would have known that I could have helped you out of all your misfortunes, driven away all your sorrows."

"But, too late, too late! The end has come and what you leave me is indeed a blighted inheritance, one haunted by the memory that you took your own life, driven to it by the ruin that stared you in the face, and ruined by one who is at heart your murderer."

"So be it! There is a day of reckoning yet to come for Duke Despard," and the eyes of the young sailor glittered ominously, as he uttered the words that were more than a threat; they meant the vengeance of one whose great love for honor made him a terrible foe to the man who had brought such dishonor on that once beautiful and proud home of the Chetwynds.

CHAPTER III.

LADY LULU.

In the most gorgeous, and fashionable of all the elegant gambling-salons for which New Orleans was particularly noted, at the time of which I write, a man stood at a table betting heavily, while others gathered about him watching his playing against chance with deep interest.

The resort was known as the "Golden Chance," and comprised half a score of rooms, a bar, a dining-hall and card alcoves, where those who wished to play in secret had the privilege, while others could sport at the public tables in the main salon.

From the entrance, leading up the massive stairway to the smallest room, the Golden Chance was fitted up with an elegance that was truly princely. Its many curtains shut out the brilliant interior from the streets; the velvet carpets gave back no sound to the footfall, and upon all the apartments rested an air of magnificence, in strange contrast with the scenes of misery and death that had been enacted there.

Negroes in scarlet livery moved about, at the beck and call of the frequenters, and a stern-faced man, dressed in deep black and wearing at all times his black slouched hat, was the lord and master of the Golden Chance.

His quiet, pale face, smooth-shaven, would cause him frequently to be mistaken for a clergyman, yet he was a noted gambler, one whom fortune had well favored, and who was, through all that might occur, the same calm, dignified being, low-voiced, courteous, but dangerous to arouse.

This man's cards read.

BIRD BRONSON,

Gambler."

And yet he was ever courtly, possessed a fine education, was well read, had traveled extensively, was rich; but more regarding him no one knew.

In one end of the salon was a dais, whereon was a *rouge-et-noir* table, behind which, in a large chair, fit for a king's throne, was seated a woman.

It was at this table that the gambler stood—none other than Duke Despard.

Strangely handsome looked the man, who, a few nights before, had won from Doctor Dudley Chetwynd his all, and thereby had sent him to a suicide's grave.

He was betting heavily, very heavily, and fortune favored him highly, for his winnings were frequent; yet his face betrayed no sign of pleasure, no emotion whatever.

About him were a full score of men, some of them city merchants, others planters from up the river, and most of these were betting also, several following the lead of Duke Despard.

In her regal chair sat the woman referred to, a book held listlessly in her hand, as she glanced over its pages, while a dealer carefully manipulated the cards, a look of stolid indifference upon his face as to whether the bank won or lost.

The one who sat in the chair was known to the frequenters of the place as the "Queen of Fortune," and also the "Masked Sport," for she wore over her face a silver network which completely concealed every feature, except a pair of glorious eyes, and the ruby-lipped mouth and dimpled chin.

That she was beautiful none who saw the features revealed doubted; and yet, why she veiled her beauty beneath the silver mask no one could tell.

Her form was perfect, full of willowy grace, slender, and her movements were as naturally graceful as the swaying of a tree in the wind.

Dressed in deep black, she wore a necklace of diamonds, while eardrops, bracelets and a ring, all set with the same precious gems, fairly dazzled the eyes of the beholder.

Who she was no one knew, though some said that she was the owner of the Golden Chance, and others that she was the wife of Bird Bronson.

Be that as it may, she certainly ruled those under her, from Bird Bronson down, with the air of a queen, and she made her power felt with the frequenters of the place.

It was said that she was often absent from her chair on the dais; still it was occupied by no other when she was not present, and rumor had it that she seldom appeared twice in the same toilet, while her jewels represented a fortune.

Sometimes luck would go against the bank with a strong run, and then it was that the Queen would appear, glide to her seat, and the tide would set in her favor so quickly that she also gained therefor the sobriquet of the Lady of Luck.

As Duke Despard stood before the table, he was betting largely and winning steadily.

At length his bets became so large that other players, from sheer interest, ceased betting and watched the bold young gambler.

"Fortune favors you to-night, Mr. Despard," came in the sweetest of voices from Lady Lulu, the Queen of Fortune, as she glanced up from her book.

"Yes, thank you; I am winning well."

And the gambler cast a hasty glance up at the woman.

"Your rest for a week did you good, for I believe you were visiting Doctor Chetwynd at his plantation of Idlerest," came in the same sweet tones.

In spite of himself Duke Despard slightly started, for he was not aware that any one knew of his visit to Idlerest.

"Yes; I was a trifle fagged out by late hours, so enjoyed my visit greatly, for Doctor Chetwynd is a noble host."

And Duke Despard cast a quick glance at the glorious eyes that beamed through the silver network.

"What a pity that he should have taken his own life," added the Queen.

"Taken his own life? Good God! has he done so?"

And Duke Despard, the cool gambler with the calm face, seemed for once to be moved deeply beyond his power to at once assume his natural air of cynical indifference.

"Yes; I learned to-night from a gentleman just down the river that Doctor Chetwynd had shot himself some nights ago, through despair at having beggared himself at cards; but did he seem in such mood when you left him, Mr. Despard?"

And a sweet smile rested upon the lips of Lady Lulu.

"Oh, no; he appeared in good spirits, though he had lost heavily; but he was expecting his son home and looked forward with pleasure to his coming."

"His son returned, I heard, to find him a corpse; but you still win heavily, Mr. Despard."

"Yes; luck is all my own to-night."

And Duke Despard laughed lightly.

All were now deeply interested, for many present knew handsome, generous-hearted Dudley Chetwynd, the Mississippi planter, and his sudden death was a great shock to them; but the desire to witness the remarkable game Duke Despard was playing soon drew their eyes once more upon him.

"Twenty thousand is what you have won, Mr. Despard," asked Lady Lulu, quietly.

"That is the sum, lady," was the answer of the dealer, pushing over to the gambler his winnings.

The queen smiled, glanced quietly over the room, and her eyes rested an instant upon Bird Bronson, who was passing near.

Instantly he came forward and said, addressing the dealer:

"Colfax, I will take your place for a few moments, while you see a friend who is awaiting you in the anteroom."

"Permit me, Bronson," said the Queen calmly, and tossing aside her book she took the cards from the dealer's hands, while Bird Bronson bowed and walked away.

"Twenty thousand you have won, Colfax said, Mr. Despard," she remarked, inquiringly.

"Yes; I am that much in pocket, lady, but I fear my luck can never hold out against your good fortune," was the reply of the handsome young sport.

"Ten thousand on it, sir, that I break your luck at once," the Queen of Fortune said in a business-like tone.

"I accept," was the low reply, and the cards were shuffled in a manner that was as marvelous as sleight-of-hand, and the woman played with the air of one utterly indifferent whether she won or lost.

"My luck is broken—you have won, Lady Lulu," carelessly said Duke Despard.

"Ten to one you do not win a game in the next five!"

"I take the bet," was the quiet reply, and with bated breath all looked on.

Duke Despard's face was emotionless; that of the woman wore a smile it was hard to diagnose, for it might have been a sneer, perhaps defiance, and maybe triumph.

She won the first game, the second, and then followed the other three with the same good fortune attending her.

"Shall we play more, sir?" she said softly.

"Not to-night, thank you, for my luck has deserted me," and with a courtly bow Duke Despard, the man who never before had quailed before a loss, seemed a trifle unwilling to face disaster when this strange, mysterious woman was the winner, when her beautiful hands dealt the cards so deftly, and her fascinating eyes met his every time he raised his own.

CHAPTER IV.

MYSTERIES OF THE GOLDEN CHANCE.

THOUGH the Golden Chance Salon was the aristocratic gambling resort of New Orleans, and its *habitués* were men only of wealth, refinement and education, there was a mystery hanging over the place that not even the most frequent visitor had ever been able to solve.

It had cost a fortune to fit up the place, in all its elegance, but the house belonged to Bird Bronson, it was said, and though he could have let the first floor to a good advantage, its doors and windows remained closed, and all offers to rent it were refused.

The house stood alone, in the center of a square, with a walled garden upon either side of it, while in the rear it went back to a block of houses, in one of which was a *café* and restaurant, opening upon another street.

The third floor was said to be occupied by Bronson as his living-rooms, and yet no one, not his most intimate friend, had been known to enter them.

There were those who said that Bird Bronson was but the agent of the mysterious masked Queen of Fortune, while others looked upon her as his wife, as we have stated.

Still he was never seen to address her in the salon, and unless she called to him, no words ever passed between them.

The several dealers had often been approached with questions regarding the mysterious Lady Lulu and Bird Bronson, but, their duties ending, they left the salon, and if they had any knowledge of the inner life of those dwelling there, they were wise enough to keep it a secret.

The half-dozen negro servants in livery were also silent upon all questions pertaining to the life led in the mansion where was the Golden Chance, and many a planter who saw them there was wont to envy the Lady Lulu such discreet and valuable slaves.

During the day the mansion was closed against all comers, but as nightfall came lights glimmered here and there in the windows, the massive front portal was thrown open and the place wore an appearance most brilliant and inviting.

Such was the Golden Chance, where Duke Despard, a professional gambler, had stood at the *rouge-et-noir* table and lost a small fortune.

It was not his wont to play against a gambler's bank, for he preferred to pluck innocent birds, in games played upon the river steamers, or at his rooms; but he had entered the Golden

Chance that night for a particular purpose; had selected the table presided over by Lady Lulu, and had begun to play, with a result already known to the reader.

As he left the *salon*, it being late, for midnight was some time past, others began to follow his example, and within the hour the elegant rooms were deserted by all the players.

The Queen of Fortune had returned to her book, until seeing that the guests had departed, she glanced at a tiny watch, and then touched a silver bell.

"Yas, mist'is," said a negro, in response to the call.

"It is three o'clock, so close the halls," was the order, and Lady Lulu arose in a tired way, just as Bird Bronson advanced toward her.

"Duke Despard was here to-night?" he said in an inquiring way.

"You saw him," was the reply.

"He won largely?" came in the same inquiring manner.

"At first, yes; but when I dealt, luck did not desert me and I won back what had been lost, and as much more from him."

"I am sorry that he has taken to playing here," said Bronson in an impatient way.

The woman's lips curled with a smile, a smile hard to understand, while she answered in a tone of much earnestness:

"I am glad that he has come here to play, for I meant that he should, and I shall be ever ready to test my luck against his. Good-night!" and rising, she stepped from her dais and approaching a velvet *portiere* swept out of sight.

As she did so, the calm face of the man flushed, and a bitter imprecation fairly hissed between his set teeth, but who it was that he anathematized it was impossible to tell, for he spoke no name.

A moment after and Bird Bronson had disappeared through a door, leading into a hallway, and almost instantly the *salon* became utterly dark, the huge portals closed with a bang, and the Golden Chance, the scene of so much misery, the scene of so much grandeur, became as gloomy and silent as the grave.

Within its walls many fortunes had been lost and won, and despair had seized so often on the heart of the loser that death by his own hand had quickly followed, then and there.

Across the card-tables men had glared at each other in deadly hate, the lie had been given, a blow had followed, and then away to the green-wood had the angry players gone to settle their differences in the *duello*.

A full score of men had died amid those gorgeous trappings; the wail of anguish, despair and horror had gone up from many a pleasant home, wrecked by the temptations of the Golden Chance; yet the lights burned just as brightly each night, the click! click! of the ivory "chips" sounded just as musically as before, and all went on the same, no one noting the vacant chairs, no one seeing the spirit forms hovering about them, yet feeling and knowing that they were there, for memory and conscience will not always down at the bidding.

CHAPTER V.

A FAIR ASSASSIN.

HARDLY had the doors of the Golden Chance *Salon* closed, when a tall form strode rapidly up to them, glanced up at the darkened windows, and halting, said impatiently:

"Too late, for the place is closed."

"Did the Masked Queen fear that the profits won from me were sufficient for to-night? Had she kept open a while longer she could have won far more, for I am in a humor to gamble high to-night."

"Then, too, I wished to find out from her all she knew regarding the suicide of Doctor Chetwynd. What a fool he was! I did not believe I would drive him to that; but the deed is done, so said Lady Lulu, and I hold his notes that give me his entire fortune and make a beggar of his handsome sailor son."

"So be it! I am now avenged upon Don Chetwynd for the punishment he once gave me, and I have thwarted him from winning the fair Fidèle Faxon, for now that he is poor her proud father will never consent for him to sue for his daughter's hand."

"But I have not done with you yet, Don Chetwynd, for I shall be master of your home, fit it up in elegant style, make it my dwelling-place, with your slaves to wait upon me, while I also shall become a claimant for the love and hand of Miss Faxon."

He had stood before the door of the Golden Chance, musing half aloud; but now he turned and rapidly retraced his steps to a street where he made his home when in the city.

Stopping before a large mansion, he took a key from his pocket and soon passed into a hallway in which burned a lamp.

Ascending a stairway to the second floor, he opened another door and suddenly found himself in an antechamber, brightly lighted up.

Leaving this he entered a large and sumptuously furnished sitting-room, with several other chambers communicating.

From one of these came a negro, short, deformed, and so hideous in shape and feature as to be actually repulsive to look upon.

His body was long, yet he was hump-backed, while his legs were short and his head huge, every feature being distorted, excepting his eyes, which to look into redeemed by their real beauty his otherwise ugliness.

As though to make the contrast to his inky-black skin the greater, he was dressed in pure white, wore a turban of scarlet silk and a blue sash.

But for the gleaming eyes, full of intelligence and feeling, he would have looked like an idiot; but when he gazed into one's face he showed that he was neither a fool nor emotionless.

The appearance of the rooms showed that their owner was expected, for a tempting repast was set upon a table, which Duke Despard, throwing aside his hat, sat down to, the strange-looking negro pouring out for him from a silver vessel a strong cup of tea.

The table glittered with silver, and the side-board near was filled with rare china and glass.

The room was exquisitely furnished, with a refinement hardly to have been expected from one whose whole dress was a trifle flashy in style and who wore a fortune in jewels.

"Any letters, Ogre?" asked Duke Despard, as he sipped his tea and nibbled some food, for he seemed to be lost in thought and to eat mechanically.

"This, master," answered the negro, handing over a little missive, sealed and scented, and the servant spoke in a voice that was strangely soft and musical.

Duke Despard frowned as he recognized the writing and tossed the letter one side.

"She left it herself, master, and said that it was important."

"All right, Ogre," was the indifferent reply, and as Duke Despard arose from the table he picked up the letter, and throwing himself into an easy-chair lighted a cigar.

Then he broke the seal, and he bit his lips vexatiously as he read, written in a bold hand:

"DUKE DESPARD:—

"Even the worm is said to turn upon its destroyer, so I urge you now to be warned in time."

"ESTELLE."

"I almost believe that she will be dangerous, so I must quiet her in some way, for she might thwart my plans, and they must permit no obstacle to bar their way."

"Ogre!"

"Yes, master."

"Breakfast at ten."

And seeking his bedchamber Duke Despard was soon fast asleep, while Ogre, putting out the lights, threw himself upon a rug and sunk into deep repose, sleeping as quietly as an infant, his breathing not being audible.

At nine o'clock the negro awoke, made a careful toilet, and then set about putting the rooms in order.

He had ordered his master's breakfast, from a *café* below stairs, and just before ten called him, as he had been directed to do.

But Duke Despard had passed a restless night, and so lingered nearly an hour before he arose.

It took but a glance for Ogre to see that his master was in ill-humor, and he was not surprised when he found fault with his breakfast, tempting as it was.

In his handsome silk dressing-gown, embroidered slippers and jaunty smoking-cap, the gambler looked very handsome, as he sat in his easy-chair, toying with the spoon in his coffee-cup with one hand and holding up with the other the morning paper, over which he was glancing with indifference, until his eyes fell upon something that startled him.

It was headed:

"DRIVEN TO DESPAIR BY GAMBLING!"

Then Duke Despard went on to read what followed, and his brow darkened as he read:

"We have just learned from our correspondent, who visited the Idlerest Plantation, of the causes leading to the most unfortunate suicide of Doctor Dudley Chetwynd, one of the most liberal-hearted and most esteemed planters on the river."

"It seems that Doctor Chetwynd had tried to make up certain losses he had sustained, through the failure of crops, by gambling for large stakes in his trips to and from his plantation on the river steamers."

"Unfortunately he met the Ruby King as an adversary, and what the luck of that strange man is, is well known to the public, and to many from sad experience."

"Inviting Duke Despard home with him, Doctor Chetwynd and the Ruby King devoted their evenings to gambling, with the result that his money, plantation, slaves and all were won by his gambler guest, who completed his visit by carrying off with him the notes of the planter conveying all his property."

"Driven to despair at having gambled away his own and his son's inheritance, Doctor Chetwynd, during the absence of his faithful valet, Kit, who had gone to the boat-landing with Mr. Despard, to catch the Natchez on her way up the river, had taken his own life with a dueling-pistol."

"Thus he was found by his son, Lieutenant Don Chetwynd of the navy, who landed from the Natchez and returned with Kit to the mansion."

"The blow was a bitter one indeed, to Don Chetwynd, who is now the last of his race, and knowing the despair of his father, which drove him to take his own life, it is stated that the young sailor said boldly that he looked upon Duke Despard as no bet-

ter than a murderer, and the one who has robbed him of his inheritance."

"To our correspondent the lieutenant made no such assertion, but it is certain that Duke Despard has won for himself a dangerous foe in Don Chetwynd, than whom no braver man is in the United States Navy."

A sneer crossed the lips of Duke Despard, as he read these lines, and he muttered:

"Don Chetwynd my foe, yes, and he has been since we were middies in the navy together, and he punished me so severely for kissing that pretty little flower-girl when we were in Naples."

"I never forgave him; for the challenge I sent him caused my dismissal from the navy; but I am slowly, but surely, getting my revenge, and when I have kept him from winning Fidèle Faxon as his wife, I will indeed be avenged."

He ceased speaking aloud, and dropping his head upon his hand sat musing in silence.

Ogre had gone out, on some errand, and so deep was the reverie of the gambler that he did not hear the door creak as it slowly opened.

His back was toward it, and he did not see a woman glide into the room.

It was a beautiful creature who stood there regarding him, her eyes strangely bright, her teeth set so hard that her full lips were white, and her bosom heaving with suppressed emotion.

She was dressed in an outdoor suit; was tall, graceful, and lovely in face as well as in form; but her features were marred now with intense hatred, as she stood, half-sheltered by the velvet curtain dropping over the door, with one hand grasping its folds, the other clinching a letter tightly in her grasp.

Releasing her hold on the curtain, the hand went slowly up to her bosom and drew from her dress folds a small pistol, pretty yet deadly.

Then she raised her skirts softly, to prevent their making the slightest sound, and glided, rather than walked, toward the man lost in reverie.

Up to within a foot of him she crept, and then the small gloved hand was held forth, the derringer grasped tightly, and the muzzle pointed directly at his head.

Not a muscle quivered; her hand was firm; her face was as stern as though carved of stone.

An instant she stood thus, he unconscious of her deadly intent, or even of her presence there, and she, in her determined purpose, not seeing that another person had entered the room.

Then in a voice low, but threatening, came the words:

"Duke Despard, I have come to slay you!"

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE RESCUE.

"DUKE DESPARD, I have come to slay you!"

The words fell like the knell of death upon the ears of Duke Despard, but a man of iron nerve he did not even start; he simply turned his head and glanced into her eyes, which had become absolutely wicked in the deadly intent that filled her heart.

"Estelle, I am glad you have come, for I meant to visit you this morning."

He spoke with the utmost calmness, and looked her straight in the eyes; but the evil of her nature was aroused, and no seeming indifference could throw her off her guard now, and she again spoke:

"I have come here to take your life, Duke Despard, to avenge myself by your death—die!"

She pressed the trigger as she spoke, and no act of his could have saved his life, for the muzzle looked him squarely in the face and the hand was motionless.

But, though the pistol exploded, the bullet went just over his head and buried itself in a mirror beyond, shivering it to fragments.

Just in the instant of time to save the life of Duke Despard the weapon had been struck upward, and a strong hand seizing it wrenched it from her grasp.

A cry of baffled rage broke from her lips as she turned upon the one who had thwarted her, and she seemed about to spring like an angry tigress upon him, but she shrunk back, and uttering a moaning cry threw herself upon a lounge and burying her face in her hands burst into tears.

At the shot Duke Despard had sprung to his feet and faced the woman and the one who had saved his life.

The man he looked upon was tall, broad-shouldered, with the bearing of a soldier, and possessing a face striking from the perfection of every feature, while it was fascinating in the extreme.

He was dressed in a suit of black, and the *crêpe* about his slouch hat showed that he was in mourning.

"Donald Chetwynd, I owe you my life. Will you accept my hand in gratitude?"

And Duke Despard spoke with deep earnestness, holding out his hand as he spoke.

Calm and cutting came the response:

"No, Despard, I will not take your hand, for enemies from boyhood, circumstances happening of late must still keep us so."

"As you please, Lieutenant Chetwynd; but

your refusal to accept my hand does not make me forget that I owe you my life."

"Consider that I have not saved your life, Mr. Despard, and let us remain as before, foes, for I came to see you upon a matter of business which I am anxious to have settled up at once."

"Indeed! I was not aware that we had business matters between us," and there was a sneer in the gambler's tone.

"We have, sir, for my father being dead, it falls upon me to arrange his outstanding matters; but I can call again, for that lady, whoever she may be, deserves your attention just now."

"No, no; do not mind me, for I am myself again, now, and I will go and leave you alone and return, Duke, to see you after awhile," and the strange woman sprang from the lounge and faced them.

"You are too dangerous a visitor, Estelle, to ask you to call again, so pray remain now. I am sure I have nothing secret with Lieutenant Chetwynd, so he is at liberty to speak out before you, if he will."

"Certainly, sir, for what I have to say can be soon said. You have lately won large sums from my father, I believe?"

"Yes, such was the case."

"May I ask just what paper you hold of his?"

"A note payable at thirty days, secured by the mansion and plantation of Idlerest."

"And what else?"

"Another note, payable two months after date, secured by the furniture in the mansion, and the stock and implements on the plantation."

"You have a third?"

"Yes, at three months, secured by some score of negroes."

"These three notes cover some fifty thousand dollars, I believe?"

"Yes."

"I am here, sir, to pay you their face in cash and take them up."

Had Don Chetwynd sprung suddenly upon him, without warning, Duke Despard could not have been more greatly astonished.

He did not think Don Chetwynd had a thousand dollars left in the world and here he offered to redeem his father's notes for fifty thousand.

"I do not care to sell the notes, sir, but to keep them until maturity," he said, quietly.

"You must give them up, sir, when I offer their face value, with interest, if so you wish it," was the decided response.

Duke Despard saw fade from his view the chance to live in Idlerest Mansion, after he had fitted it up, and to own the slaves who had been born on the Chetwynd Plantation; but, more than all, he saw that his enemy had money where he had deemed him a beggar, and he began to fear him again as a rival for the love of a beautiful maiden who dwelt upon the Mississippi shore not far from the home of Donald Chetwynd.

"Some friend has loaned him this; but I shall see if he has more," he thought, and he said casually:

"Lieutenant Chetwynd—"

"Do not give me a rank I do not hold, Mr. Despard, for I have resigned from the navy."

"Resigned?" and Despard arched his brows with surprise.

"Yes, sir, I came home to be near my father in his latter years, and as you know, sir, found him dead."

"Then you will return to the navy again?" and Duke Despard felt uncomfortable under the gaze fixed upon him.

"No, I shall remain at Idlerest, trying to build up my wrecked inheritance, for when I redeem my father's notes, it will have taken all that I inherited from my mother."

Duke Despard saw just where Don Chetwynd got his money, and so he said, with a thrill of pleasure at the discovery:

"Then you are not willing to pay a bonus on the notes?"

"Not willing, sir, nor have I the money with which I can do so."

"Why not wait until they come to maturity, Mr. Chetwynd?"

"Because I prefer to take them up at once, sir. Here is your money, in a certified check on the State Bank," and he threw down the valuable scrap of paper.

"Mr. Chetwynd, under ordinary circumstances I would hold your father's notes; but, as you saved me from the bullet of that fair assassin, I will restore them to you as an appreciation of my gratitude to you for your act."

"My dear sir, you are under no obligations to me, and this is a business transaction between us, so give me the notes and permit me to remove myself as soon as possible from the presence of one whom I detest, as I do you."

The eyes of Duke Despard glittered wickedly at these words; but he made no reply, and going to his desk he took therefrom the coveted pieces of paper and placed them in the hands of Don Chetwynd.

The young planter gazed at them a moment and said:

"These are correct, sir, and there lies your check."

Bowing haughtily as he spoke, he turned upon his heel, inclined his head courteously to the woman, who sat upon the lounge, silent, but watching both men.

Hardly had Don Chetwynd disappeared through the doorway, when, with the spring of a tigress, the woman was upon the gambler, and in her upraised hand was a dagger which she had taken unseen from some hiding-place in her dress.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S THREAT.

So unexpected was this second attack upon him, by the infuriated woman, that Duke Despard, but for his presence of mind, would have met instant death, then and there.

The heavy table was behind him, so he could not spring backward to avoid the blow; but he quickly threw up his left arm and caught the blade in the flesh, it penetrating through to the hilt; then seizing her hand the weapon was wrested from her grasp and the woman hurled from him.

She fell heavily to the floor, half-rose, glared at him an instant, and dropping upon her face burst into tears.

Calmly he stood surveying her, but turned quickly as the door opened and Ogre entered.

If the deformed, afrite-looking negro was surprised, he certainly did not show it, but obeyed his master's call and came quickly to his side.

"Draw this steel blade from my arm, Ogre, and then dress the wound, for well I know your skill as a surgeon."

The woman did not look up at the entrance of the negro, nor at the words of the gambler, and Ogre, without a glance at her, took his master's hand and drawing up his clothing, looked at the arm, in which the sharp blade was buried, while he said in his low voice:

"A little more, master, and an artery would have been severed; it was a close call, sir."

"The second one she has given me to-day," remarked Despard, with a bitter laugh.

"Beware of the third attempt," came in a voice full of wicked intent, from the woman's lips, and she raised her head and sprang to her feet, shrinking back, however, as though dreading the negro, but still gazing upon Duke Despard with glittering eyes.

The gambler laughed lightly at her warning, and she watched in silence the negro as he drew the steel from the arm and then, skillfully stanching the bleeding, dressed the wound.

"Now, Estelle, pray sit down, for I would have a talk with you. Ogre, you can await in the outer room," and Duke Despard spoke as calmly as though he had not just passed through a most deadly ordeal.

Gliding to a position near a window the woman leant against it in a graceful attitude and said sharply:

"Well, sir, what have you to say to me?"

She looked very beautiful as she thus stood, her face flushed with excitement, her bosom rising and falling with suppressed emotion, and her whole attitude that of a woman at bay.

She was young, scarcely over twenty, and her dark complexion, black eyes and ebony hair gave the impression that she was of Spanish, or Mexican birth.

Her face was full of passion, her form superb, and her every movement one of unstudied grace.

Weirdly beautiful she looked, a being to love and be loved only with intensity, and one to be dangerous, as she had proven herself, if her jealousy was aroused.

Lighting a cigar with the air of one who held no care on earth, Duke Despard walked over to the lounge, and throwing himself upon it in an easy attitude, said, in answer to her question:

"Estelle, it is for you to speak, for you have twice attempted my life within half an hour, and I think some explanation is necessary."

"Duke Despard, I hate you!" she hissed.

"Yesterday you said that you loved me," he suggested.

"My love has turned to hatred the most intense."

"And yet had you killed me, Estelle, had your bullet, or your knife gone true; and I now been lying here, with my dead face upturned to yours, with no word of love on my lips for you, with no power in my hands to caress you, you—"

"Oh, God! don't speak so, Duke! No! no! no! do not drag such an appalling picture before my eyes, as you lying dead, and by my hand!" and, with a spring as agile as a panther, she was upon her knees by his side, her face buried on his breast.

He smiled, and laid his hand caressingly upon her ebony hair, while he said softly:

"You do not wish me dead, then, Estelle?"

"No, no, no!"

"Yet you sought to kill?"

"I was mad, frenzied with jealousy, and, in truth, Duke, I would rather see you dead, yes, by my hand, than have you love another woman, and know that she loved you."

"But why do you have such jealous fancies, my Estelle?"

She raised her flushed face quickly and speaking in a slow, earnest way, answered:

"Duke, have you forgotten two years ago when you met me? I had just been married to a man I did not love; but he was rich, and my parents urged me to wed him and I did so, though really I detested him."

"He entered into a game of cards with you one night, on the steamer, and you won heavily from him, which drove him to accuse you of trickery."

"You know the result—that he sought your life and lost his at your hand, while, meeting me over his body, you gave to me all you had won from him."

"Ah, Duke, then it was, even when I grieved for him dead as my husband, though with no atom of affection for him, that I found I had a heart, and loved you."

"You won my love in its entirety, Duke, and when you asked me to bless your life, I forgot the grim specter of that man haunting me; I stepped across the grave between us and became happy in your love."

"It was a happy little home you gave me, Duke, on the river-shore above the city, with its vine-covered windows and flower-beds, and I was happy, very happy, though you came seldom to me."

"But, Duke, a shadow—a dark shadow has come between us, and it has driven me to frenzy."

She paused and looked at him; but his face was as emotionless as marble. Not even when she spoke of his killing her husband, had he betrayed by the quiver of a muscle that he was interested in what she said.

When she concluded her short, pathetic story, and looked at him, he asked simply:

"And what is this shadow, Estelle, that has crept into your heart?"

"A woman!" she cried, fiercely.

"Bah! you are all wrong, little one."

"I am right, Duke, and feeling that I was losing your love, I decided to keep another from winning you."

"And so sought to make me food for worms! But I tell you, my dear Estelle, there is no woman to take your place in my heart," and he took her hand gently.

"Then why have you, Duke, a gambler, playing with men who are not of your kind, but planters and young men who are innocent—why are you, I say, going to the Golden Chance to risk your money at cards?"

He looked at her quickly and asked:

"Who told you I went to the Golden Chance Estelle?"

"It matters not, Duke, who told me, but I know, for true love is jealous, and fearing you were going to give me up, I wished to know who it was that had won you from me."

"It is all nonsense, Estelle, and certainly there is no one at the Golden Chance for you to be jealous of, as it is a gambling-hell, you know."

"Yes, I know," was the significant response.

"It is true I seldom go there, and more seldom play when I do; but I wished to try my luck against Bird Bronson's bank, and did so."

"You lost?"

"Yes, largely."

"Was it for money you played?"

"What other motive had I?"

"There is a woman who presides over the Golden Chance."

The gambler looked slightly annoyed, for the presence of Lady Lulu at the Golden Chance was a secret kept among the men who frequented the place, as many jealousies might have been awakened by the knowledge that the Queen of Fortune was mistress of the superb salon.

"Oh, yes, there is a woman there—doubtless Bronson's wife, and he must be jealous of her, as she wears a mask all the time," he answered, with indifference of manner.

"Then you do not know whether she is beautiful, or not?"

"I should assume that she was, though being masked, from some strange reason, I cannot tell."

"Does no one see her unmasked?"

"I have never heard of any one having seen her face."

"Did she deal when you played?"

"Yes."

"And you lost?"

"I did, most assuredly."

"Duke, that is the woman I fear," she said impressively.

He laughed lightly, but she continued:

"I have seen this strange Queen of Fortune, how or when it matters not, and I know that she is beautiful; and more, that she tries to fascinate men, bewilder them, and, by so doing, win their money."

"Nonsense!" he protested, impatiently.

"It is not nonsense, but the truth, for there are men that go there to gamble merely to see this Queen, and so great are her powers of fascination, that, like the drunkard, once they

have tasted, they yield, and night after night her victims flock there to play away their gold at her sweet will.

"You are rich, Duke, and gamble with greater nerve, it is said, than any man on the river, or in the city, and yet, before the glare of this woman's masked face you lose."

"I have known this, and believing you fascinated by this Queen, and that she would steal you from me, I determined to kill you."

"You are a jealous little fool, Estelle, and I hope will not be guilty of such an act again. You know what you are to me, and that no one can win me from you, so be happy and trust me."

"I will trust you again, Duke, but I will be watchful; but remember—before the Queen of Fortune shall take you from me, *I will kill you*," and as he looked into her beautiful face, now full of passion, he saw that she meant every word she uttered, and he confessed to himself:

"When a woman threatens, and that woman is Estelle, I must be warned."

CHAPTER VIII.

FIGHTING FORTUNE.

In spite of the warning he had received, Duke Despard did not heed, as regarded his going to the Golden Chance, for toward midnight, following the day of Estelle's desperate attack upon him, he wended his way toward the *salon*.

The man on watch knew him well, and saluted him politely as he reached the entrance, and he was about to cross the threshold when an old woman stepped forward and said pleadingly:

"Oh, sir, help a poor unfortunate, I pray you!"

Duke Despard was generous, as most gamblers are, and he instantly thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a gold-piece, which he held forth for the woman.

She grasped his hand warmly, and said, in a quivering voice:

"Heaven bless you, kind sir, and I would that my prayers could keep you from entering this palace of sin, for it has been the cause of much sorrow to me through one I love."

"My good woman, good and evil in this world are about equally divided, and what is one man's loss here is another's gain."

"If prayers had kept me from gambling, I would have been a better man; but, as it is, I am a gambler, and the money I gave you, and which will help you from suffering, was won from another."

With this short homily Duke Despard passed on up the grand stairway, while the doorman said:

"I guess she needed it, sir, for I never saw her before, and she doesn't look like a common beggar."

"So I thought," answered Despard, and he glanced back at the poorly-clad form of the old woman, for her hair was white and hung in elfin locks about her shoulders.

Entering the *salon*, Duke came face to face with Bird Bronson.

The two knew each other well, and yet, though fellow-gamblers, they had never been more than acquaintances.

What Despard was on the Mississippi River, Bronson was in the city.

The former kept his state-room by the year on the two finest steamers, so that he could go and come at will, and they were fitted up in princely style.

His word was good among the river captains for any amount, and, a handsome, refined, elegant fellow, to all appearances, he was greatly courted by all.

A dangerous man he certainly was if aroused, and his nerve and self-control had made him master of scores of desperate situations.

In the city, where he had his elegantly-furnished apartments, he did not gamble, unless with an occasional visitor to his apartments, and so he did not conflict with Bird Bronson, the owner, or manager of the Golden Chance.

When, therefore, Bird Bronson met Despard, as he entered he remarked, pleasantly:

"How goes the world with the Ruby King this evening?"

"Well, thank you, Bronson. I have come in to try my luck again this evening against your bank."

"How did you prosper last night?" asked Bronson, as though he knew nothing as to whether Despard had lost or won.

Despard smiled, for he felt that Bronson was trying to deceive him; but he answered quietly:

"I lost, and I have a favor to ask of you to-night, Bronson."

"The cashier will give you any stake you wish, Despard."

"You are mistaken, for I do not wish to borrow money, as I am amply provided; but I would like to try my luck at the Queen's table to-night."

"You certainly have every right, Despard, to do so."

"First, I desire to play against your dealer; then, if I win, to have you deal, and next to play against the Queen of Fortune."

"I will see that you are obliged, Despard."

"Thank you; but now, may I ask, without offending, who the Queen of Fortune is?"

"Just what you see her—the Lady of Luck of the Golden Chance."

"This is an evasion of my question, Bronson."

"Then take it as a hint to ask no more questions regarding our Queen of Fortune, for, if she desires to wrap herself in mystery, her wishes shall be respected."

Despard, seeing that he was foiled, bowed and walked off with the remark:

"Kindly see that I have an opportunity to play my luck as I have suggested."

"Certainly," and Bird Bronson went toward the hall occupied by Lady Lulu, while Duke Despard sauntered leisurely along among the various rooms.

He suddenly came upon a person whose presence there seemed to surprise him, and he drew near the table by which the one referred to stood, engaged in playing cards, though betting small sums.

It was none other than Don Chetwynd, the young planter, and behind him a few paces, attentively regarding the game, was his negro body-servant, Kit—a tall, handsome negro, with a courtly manner copied from his master, and a face of great intelligence and character.

As the eyes of Despard and Don Chetwynd met, the former raised his hat, to which the latter merely gave the slightest sign of recognition and went on with his playing with the utmost calmness.

A wicked light seemed to flash in the eyes of Kit, as he saw the gambler, but he bowed courteously, when Despard nodded to him and passed on his way.

After a round of the spacious rooms, Duke Despard approached the place where the Queen of Fortune presided.

There she sat, looking very beautiful, as far as could be judged beneath her mask, and dressed with most exquisite taste.

As was her wont she held a book in her hand and was glancing over the pages, while Colfax dealt the cards.

All gave Despard room as he advanced, and with polite thanks he raised his hat to the Lady Lulu, who smiled recognition.

Without hesitation he threw down a thousand dollars on the table, and almost instantly won.

And so it continued, until he had won a large sum, Colfax seeming to become a trifle nervous and glancing up at the Queen, as though for instructions.

Interested in his heavy playing, the others about the table had drawn off from betting and watched him with great interest.

"Colfax, I'll relieve you for awhile," said Bird Bronson, coming forward, and he took the dealer's place.

Duke Despard did not change countenance, but simply doubled his bet and won.

Thus the game went on. Duke Despard quietly and surely winning, though his face was perfectly emotionless, and his voice without a quiver when he spoke.

Equally as calm was Bird Bronson, though his bank had never suffered as heavily before, and his fingers showed no sign of nervousness as he handled the cards.

The Lady Lulu kept on reading her novel with the utmost indifference, while the spectators, some two-score in number, those not interested in the losing and winning of the players, were greatly excited, watching the turn of each card with the deepest interest.

"I am just fifty thousand ahead, I believe, and I will be glad to see if the Queen of Fortune can break my run of luck," said Duke Despard, raising his hat as he addressed Lady Lulu.

"I will reverse your good fortune with pleasure, as you seem to desire it, sir," was the reply, and the Queen took the card, which Bird Bronson handed to her, yielding his place at the same time.

"I will begin with ten thousand, Lady Lulu," and he placed the amount upon the card he selected as the winning one.

Instantly he lost, and a murmur of surprise ran through the crowd.

Lady Lulu did not appear to change expression, though she had at once "broken the luck," so to speak, of the gambler who had so steadily won before.

"Ten thousand more," was Despard's quiet remark, and he, too, did not show that he felt the change of fortune against him.

Again he lost, and the third time he staked thirty thousand, making the balance of what he had won from Colfax and Bird Bronson.

"The bank wins, sir," announced Lady Lulu, without the shadow of any emotion at her good fortune.

"I place twenty-five thousand on the next game," was the unexpected reply of Despard.

"The bank claims it," and Lady Lulu spoke as sweetly as though she was doing a favor to the gambler in winning his money.

"I will stake as much more," and Despard was placing the sum upon the table, when a youthful voice asked:

"Is Mr. Despard here?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"A letter for you, sir, and it is important," and a boy stepped forward and handed him a note.

"Your pardon, lady," he said, as he broke the seal, while his face flushed.

The contents were short and to the point:

"Come to me! ESTELLE."

He frowned as he read the written words, and then turned to the boy.

"Say that I will come at once."

"Yes, sir," and the boy disappeared, while the gambler again turned to the table and placed the sum he had staked upon it.

"You have lost, sir," said the Queen of Fortune, pleasantly.

"Yes, it seems that the boasted good fortune of the Lady of Luck is not overestimated, but some time the tide may turn. Good-night!" and Duke Despard turned away, and after a word of greeting with several whom he knew, left the *salon*, not, however, until he noticed that Don Chetwynd was still there, and playing, though at a different table from the one at which he had left him, while behind him stood his faithful slave, Kit.

Calling to one of the numerous hacks that always waited in the vicinity of the Golden Chance, Duke Despard ordered the driver to take him to a designated place on the outskirts of the city.

It was a pretty little cottage, just such a one as it would seem that love and happiness would dwell in, for the piazza overlooked the river, an orange-grove was upon one side of the house, a vegetable garden upon the other, and in front were *parterres* of flowers, rich, rare and fragrant.

A light burned in one window, and as the gambler reached the piazza the door opened and Estelle, attired in a most becoming house-robe, threw open the door and met him.

"Why, Estelle, I expected to find you ill, from your note," he said, impatiently.

"I am ill, Duke, but the pain is here, for you were again playing cards at the Golden Chance," she said, petulantly.

"How know you this?"

"It matters not; but you see I know, though you said to me you were going up the river on the Princess to-night."

"I missed the boat, so will take the Natchez to-morrow; but I like not the way you are shadowing me, Estelle."

"Then give up that woman!"

"You are a little fool, for I play to win only, and have no thought of that masked woman that Bronson uses as a card to draw custom to his *salon*."

"I tell you, Estelle, I would give ten years of my life to break Bronson's bank, and I believe I can do it, and for that alone I go there."

"If I could only believe it."

"You can, for no woman holds any charm for me, Estelle, other than yourself, so for Heaven's sake cease this cruel espionage over me, or you will regret it."

"What will you do?"

"I must cease to love a woman who does not trust me and has me shadowed by night and day."

She started at his words and said:

"Well, Duke, I will trust you; but don't fail me, I implore you."

And the same dangerous light—the same threatening glitter he had before seen—came into her eyes as they were bent unflinchingly upon him.

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE.

Two persons were riding along the bank of the Mississippi River, enjoying the beauty of the scenery.

It was near the sunset hour, the river looked like a silver flood rolling swiftly along, as the sun fell upon it, and the plantation homes with occasional steamboats gliding along, added picturesqueness to the scene.

The two persons referred to were a young man and a maiden, and they were both mounted upon spirited horses and rode with the ease of only those who were reared in the saddle.

The gentleman is Don Chetwynd, the young planter; the maiden is the lovely lady of "The Retreat" plantation—which adjoins the Chetwynd estate.

And who was she?

When home on leave, as a midshipman, Don Chetwynd had been on a Mississippi steamer one night when she took fire, and the cool head and commanding voice of the young sailor had saved many lives, among whom was a fair girl of twelve, the daughter of a retired army officer who had come to dwell upon his plantation. "The Retreat," which adjoined the property of Doctor Chetwynd.

The girl whose life he then saved is the maiden of nineteen, now presented to the reader as the fair horsewoman who was riding along the river-bank with Don Chetwynd as her escort.

From that night of horror, on the burning steamer, Fidèle Faxon had never forgotten her sailor hero.

She had thought of him during her school-days, and upon Christmas and her birthday an-

niversary, had regularly received from foreign lands some souvenir to prove that she was not forgotten by her sailor boy admirer, for Don had, in truth, become deeply interested in the lovely Fidèle.

When he returned home to find his father dead, Fidèle had at once written him a note full of deepest sympathy, and she had gone with her father to the funeral and noted the sad, stern face of the young sailor, as he stood at the grave of the last near relative he had.

It had been two years since Fidèle had last seen Donald, and she had then looked upon him, young as she was, as one who loved her, while his devotion to her was marked both by Colonel Faxon and Doctor Chetwynd with pleasure.

But, back to his now desolated home came Don Chetwynd, and, though the money he had saved from his mother's legacy rescued the plantation and a score of faithful old slaves from the clutches of Duke Despard, he felt that he was looked upon as being comparatively poor, with a name dishonored by that last dread act which had made him fatherless.

So, returning to his forlorn home he thought: "Now I can test the love of Fidèle, if she does love me as I have had every hope she did."

Going to the city, after the burial of his father, young Chetwynd, to the surprise of those who knew all, sought the Golden Chance and began to bet.

His bets were not heavy, and he played in a strangely mechanical way, as though for a purpose, and those who saw him felt sure that he was a novice at cards.

Still he was not unsuccessful, and left the Golden Chance a winner.

Returning to his plantation home, Don Chetwynd, after a few days' stay, called at The Retreat and a warm welcome awaited him from Fidèle, who had now grown into a most beautiful woman of nineteen.

Colonel Faxon, a distinguished-looking man of fifty-five, also gave the young planter a cordial greeting, in spite of the rumor that Idlerest and all the negroes were mortgaged heavily.

Thus the old-time friendship was renewed, and the reader finds them riding horseback together one pleasant afternoon some weeks after the redeeming of his father's notes from the hands of Duke Despard.

As they rode slowly along, Fidèle suddenly asked, while her face flushed as she did so:

"Mr. Chetwynd, do you play cards for money?"

He started at her question, and answered:

"Miss Fidèle, until lately I never played cards, for I never cared to do so; but within the past few weeks I have done so."

"You do not gamble, I hope?" and she spoke with considerable anxiety in her tone.

"Yes, I gamble, for by doing so I can learn the better to play well."

"Oh, why do you play?" she eagerly asked.

"I understand that you can feel I have had reason enough not to do so."

"Yes; but more—my father is such a lover of cards that I was going to say he would almost stake his soul on a game, for it seems to be an irresistible mania with him, and I have come to detest a card, and to fear it; but he is deaf to all my entreaties to give up gambling, and some day I fear it may work his ruin."

"It seems to be generally the fate of the card-player for gold, Miss Fidèle, though I do not wish to be a Job's comfortor."

"And yet you play, knowing the result so well?"

"Understand me, please, and let me tell you a secret: I may be a gambler, a card-player, but I detest both. I play for a purpose, Miss Fidèle," and his words and looks indicated that he was in deadly earnest and there was some mystery in his actions.

"Do you know this man, a professional gambler, whom they call the Ruby King?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes, we were midshipmen together, for he comes of a good family, inherited a small fortune, squandered it and took to gambling."

"He is wonderfully successful, I have heard."

"Yes, he either has wonderful fortune, or—"

He paused and Fidèle said:

"Pray continue."

"I meant to add that he was a cheat."

"He is a strangely handsome man, very distinguished in appearance—in fact, most courtly, and I could hardly believe he would be so evil as that, though it is said he is heartless and merciless."

"You have met him, then?" quickly asked Donald, a twinge of jealousy at his heart.

"Yes, I met him some months ago when in the city, and he saved me from being trampled under foot by a runaway team. I was crossing the street, and heard shouts of warning, when right upon me came a pair of horses running at full speed, the driver having lost all control of them."

"I was motionless with fear, and the next instant would have been dashed beneath their feet, when a tall form bounded to my side, threw his arm about my waist and sprung out of the way with me, just as the maddened animals dashed over the spot where I had stood."

"He saw how frightened I was, called a carriage and told the driver to stop at a drug-store near, from whence he brought me a reviving draught, raised his hat, as he hoped I would not suffer from the shock, and knowing me, it seems, bade the driver take me to my hotel."

"I did not even thank him; so father called, and several times Mr. Despard—for he it was—has visited us at our home for a day or two."

"A fatal visitor, Miss Fidèle, as my poor father learned to his cost; but I hope your father can keep out of his clutches," said Don Chetwynd, earnestly.

"God grant it! But there comes the Princess, and she is heading in toward The Retreat landing, so papa has returned, as he said he would. Come; we will not be in time to meet him, for he will get home before we do, but you will remain to tea and hear what news there is from the city."

"Gladly would I do so, but for an important engagement to-night. A gentleman comes on the Princess to see me on business matters, Miss Fidèle, so I will have to leave you at your gate, if you will pardon me for so doing."

"Certainly, if you must go; but I will expect you over soon again."

"And I will come, Fidèle, for I have a secret to tell you which I never told any other living being," and she blushed at his words and manner.

They now started forward at a gallop, the majestic river steamer having run in and landed at The Retreat plantation landing, which was a quarter of a mile distant from the mansion, and then held on up the river to also touch at the Idlerest estate.

Colonel Faxon had been seen to go ashore from the steamer, enter his carriage and drive homeward, and as Donald and the maiden reached the massive gateway leading into the ornamental grounds surrounding The Retreat Manor, the young planter glanced up the river toward his home and said:

"Yes, the Princess has landed and my friend has come on her, so I will ask you to excuse me now, Fidèle."

"Certainly, but I will expect you soon," and she placed her little gloved hand in his.

"I will come very soon, for I am anxious to tell you that secret I spoke of."

"Oh!" and she looked down.

"Are you anxious to hear it?"

"What one of my sex is not anxious to learn a secret, sir?" she said playfully, and kissing her finger-tips to him she rode on toward the mansion, her heart throbbing with anticipation and joy, for well is it not given us to know what the morrow will bring forth.

Had Fidèle Faxon known what a change in her life a few short hours would make, every atom of joy would have then and there fled from her heart—but let me not anticipate the coming of the shadows and the storm.

CHAPTER X.

DESPAIR.

"THE RETREAT" was one of the most cheerful plantation homes that dotted the banks of the broad "Father of Waters."

Back of the river a third of a mile, it was surrounded by ornamental grounds, vast flower gardens, lawns and a park of majestic trees.

From the river highway, which followed the levee, a broad road led to the mansion, the entrance being through a massive gateway of stone, built in imitation of a ruined arch.

Upon the river-bank was a rustic arbor, which served the double purpose of a lookout upon the river, and a place where one could wait to catch a passing steamer.

From here, called the Landing, the cotton raised on the plantation was shipped.

In the rear of the mansion cotton-fields stretched away for a mile or more, with a dark background of forest beyond, and hill-lands far in the distance.

The residence was two stories, and very large, spreading over considerable space, while piazzas completely surrounded it.

Far in the rear the white quarters, three-score in number, were visible, and in a grove of magnolias, on the slope of a hillside, stood a gothic chapel, the place of worship for the negroes, and which had for its minister "Parson Zekiel," as he was called on Sundays, though in every-day life he was known as simple "Uncle Zeke."

Uncle Zeke was also the factotum of the mansion, attending to all the duties of the household as butler and general master of ceremonies, and a more courteous old colored gentleman and faithful servant was not known in Mississippi.

For three generations his ancestors had served the Faxons, and Uncle Zeke was only respected by the slaves as next to the master.

The inmates of The Retreat consisted of Colonel Faxon, his lovely daughter Fidèle, and the colonel's old-maid cousin, who had been left to his guardianship, along with a snug fortune all her own.

This cousin was one whose aim in life was to get married, as she had formed several attachments wholly unworthy of her.

A good, but simple soul, she was wont to tell

Fidèle that it was a woman's duty to marry, and "some day she meant to;" but as "Miss Phoebe" was on the shady side of thirty-six it looked as though her chances were small, especially as the colonel was very particular as to her associates, knowing her romantic disposition, her not over strong mind, and that she would be a target for some designing men who hoped to enrich themselves upon her very snug fortune.

Miss Phoebe was given to dressing with the same youthfulness as did Fidèle, affected sun-hats with flowing ribbons, and read novels.

She played some old-fashioned dances on the piano, sung rather well a few old-time ballads, and her duties consisted in looking after the flower-gardens, for Fidèle was the housekeeper, and an excellent one, too.

Besides Uncle Zeke, there were half a dozen house servants, all trained thoroughly, and among them is one deserving of particular mention.

This one is Trip, Fidèle's quadroon maid—a very handsome girl of eighteen, with large, deer-like eyes, a deep olive complexion and a figure of rare beauty.

Trip was devoted to her young mistress, and if Uncle Zeke had a weakness it was for Fidèle's pretty maid, for the old parson was a bachelor, to the great regret of certain colored widows on the plantation.

Such was the home that Fidèle returned to, after Don Chetwynd had bidden her good-by at the gate, with the promise to come soon to see her and make known a secret he would tell no one else.

Dashing up to the side door, she sprung from her horse, and a negro boy led the animal away.

"Where is my father, Trip?" she asked her maid, who met her at the door.

"In the library, Missy Fidèle, and he don't look well," was the answer.

Hastening to the library Fidèle drew aside the portière over the door and there beheld her father.

He was seated in the open window, and his eyes were fixed upon the river, with the Princess steaming rapidly away in the distance.

Throwing the skirt of her riding-habit over her arm, Fidèle stole forward on tip-toe, intending to give her father a surprise by throwing her arms about his neck.

But, hardly had she half-crossed the room, when the planter uttered a mingled cry and moan, and the words broke from his lips:

"Ruined! utterly ruined! I have thrown away my child's inheritance, and to a gambler!"

"Ay, even my cousin's fortune, held in trust by me, is covered by my notes given that accursed Ruby King, and soon we will be left in almost utter poverty."

"Great God! I was mad to gamble as I did. I who am strong in all else, am a weak fool when tempted by cards to gamble."

He dropped his face in his hands, resting them upon the window sill, and groaned in agony of spirit.

Like one dazed did Fidèle Faxon stand, her ears ringing with the words uttered by her father, her whole form quivering with the fearful truth she learned from his lips.

Then, as his head was bowed, she slowly turned and glided from the room, ere he was aware of her presence and the bitter, cruel secret he had betrayed by his outspoken words.

Going to her room, Fidèle paced the floor, her face pale, her bosom heaving, until the bell rung for tea, when she made a hasty toilet and descended to the supper-room.

Her father greeted her most affectionately, and he was perfectly calm; but she saw that it was a forced calmness, for his face was white and haggard, and several times Miss Phoebe remarked this fact, until the colonel said, petulantly:

"I have lost a great deal of sleep, Phoebe."

But Fidèle knew that it was almost despair that drove sleep from him, and yet she determined not to speak to him upon the subject, but await until he came to her and told her all.

What she had feared often had at last come to pass, and from an heiress, she knew that she would now be poor; but it was not for herself that she sorrowed, but her father and her Aunt Phoebe, for she had always called Miss Faxon "Auntie."

"How quickly will my numerous suitors desert me, when they learn I am poor," she said, with a sneer, adding in a low tone:

"Will Don Chetwynd do the same, I wonder?"

CHAPTER XI.

MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

It was the afternoon of the second day after the return of Colonel Faxon to his home, beggared by his mania for gambling, and with slow step he was pacing up and down the broad piazza, now and then stopping to look upon the grand steamer that was coming in toward The Retreat landing.

When the steamer was first sighted, the colonel had told Uncle Zeke to send the carriage to the landing for a visitor, and he had said casually to Fidèle that Mr. Despard was to spend a

few hours at The Retreat, while the Princess was taking on a cargo of cotton that awaited her.

Fidèle had seated herself in a favorite window of hers, soon after, and it was not long before her father came out upon the piazza and began to pace to and fro.

He did not know of her presence there, nor had she anticipated his coming upon the piazza, but once there she determined to remain, feeling that she would hear just what mastery Duke Despard held over her father, though she abhorred the act of eavesdropping.

"Father has not confided in me and I will know all, if I have to face both him and that strange, fascinating gambler, Duke Despard," she said to herself.

Soon after she saw the carriage roll up to the door and Duke Despard sprung out, while the vehicle rolled away.

She had heard her father's muttered words:

"There comes my master, for the debtor is the slave of the creditor, a more abject slavery than that which exists between me and my negroes; but I must face all now, and meet the worst, if he will not be merciful.

"Merciful! bah! the word is not known to Duke Despard."

These words told Fidèle how bitterly her father suffered, and yet she saw him greet the visitor pleasantly.

"Sit here, Mr. Despard, unless you wish to go to your room first," he said.

"No, thank you, I will sit out here where it is very cool and pleasant.

"I hope Miss Faxon is well?"

"My cousin is quite well, thank you."

"Ah yes; she had quite escaped my memory, and it was to your daughter I referred."

"My daughter is also well; but pardon me, while I order refreshments, for I suppose you wish to continue on in the Princess?"

"Yes, though she has a considerable cargo of cotton to take on board, which will give me a couple of hours, or more, while Captain Cannon will wait for me a limited time, should I be detained."

"There is little to detain us, sir, for I had my lawyer in the village draw up all the papers this morning."

"Then all can soon be arranged."

Colonel Faxon arose and called to Uncle Zeke to bring wine and refreshments, and these were soon placed upon a rustic table before them, while Fidèle, from her nook in the window, heard all and murmured:

"Is this right of me to listen? My nature revolts from it, and yet something bids me remain."

"How handsome, how dangerously fascinating that gambler looks! Can he be the very devil that men say he is?"

"Mr. Despard," said the colonel, in a low, earnest voice, "you have won from me, at different playings, large sums, covered by my notes, and upon our last run up the river you won my entire fortune, and more."

"And more?" asked Despard, arching his eyebrows.

"Yes."

"How can that be?"

"I gave you notes, payable on demand, that included the balance of my estates."

"Yes, and a princely fortune it is."

"But I risked, to try and win back the losses that maddened me, an estate I hold in trust as a guardian."

"Can it be that Colonel Faxon has done this?" and there was a sneer in the tone.

"It is, alas, true, for I was maddened by my bad luck, and, hoping to gain back what you had won, I gave you notes, covered by property that belongs to my cousin, Miss Phoebe Faxon, but which is held all in my name, so great has been her trust in me."

"I am sorry, Colonel Faxon, very sorry for you."

"I desire to give to you the title to all of my estate, negroes and all, as you have won them, but I beg of you to let it appear as a sale to you, and then I can arrange to recuperate my shattered fortunes, whereas, if known to be poor I can do nothing."

"As for my notes, secured by Miss Faxon's property, I wish to make them payable at one, two and three years."

"This favor I ask of you, Despard, and, as you are, by your winnings from me, made a very rich man, I feel that you can grant it."

"I was a very rich man before, Colonel Faxon; but you may recall that I hinted to you a way out of your difficulties."

"I recall that you did, but failed to understand your meaning."

"Let me make it plain, sir."

"Well, you will find me a good listener."

"You have a daughter?"

"Alas! it is her inheritance which I gambled away."

"You are aware that I was so fortunate as to have saved her from being trampled under foot by a runaway team?"

"I can never forget it, sir."

"I have, from that moment, loved Miss Faxon with my whole heart—"

"Sir!"

"Hear me, my dear colonel, I beg of you."

"I am not ill-shapen, I was well-born, reared a gentleman, and I do not believe that any one would dare tell me to-day that I was not one."

"Well, Despard, what does this mean?"

"I am rich, as you know, and the notes I hold of yours place you in a most awkward position. Mind you, I do not threaten, only suggest."

"In Heaven's name what do you mean?"

"I mean that I will place every obligation of yours, I now hold, in your hands, if Miss Faxon will become my wife."

Colonel Faxon sprung to his feet and his face was livid, while he hissed forth:

"What! my daughter become the wife of a gambler?"

"Wherein is the difference between a gambler's wife and a gambler's daughter?"

The shot told, and Colonel Faxon dropped back into his seat, while Duke Despard went on in his quiet way to say:

"The difference between us, Colonel Faxon, is that gambling is my profession and your pastime, a distinction without a difference."

"You have just placed yourself in a bad light by gambling away your fortune, your daughter's inheritance, and securing your notes by property held in trust by you."

"I tell you that I love your daughter, and I will win her love if she will marry me."

"I wish to ask her to become my wife, without her knowing that you are wholly in my power; but if she does not consent, then she must know all."

"That I prize her highly you must know from the price I am willing to pay for her hand, giving you all back that I have won from you, while I take chances upon winning her love."

"No! no! no! I will never consent to the sacrifice, and she will never, never accept your offer."

"What is it, papa, that I will never do, for I overheard your words."

"Ah, Mr. Despard, you have arrived then, for papa said you would come on the Princess, which I see at the Landing, and Fidèle walked toward Duke Despard and offered her hand."

His face flushed as he bent low over it, and he answered:

"Yes, Miss Faxon, I accepted an invitation from your father to visit The Retreat when the Princess stopped on her down-river run."

"But it seems that I was the subject under discussion, between you and father, and I would like to know what it is that I will not do."

"Tell me, papa?" and Fidèle looked into her father's face with a smile.

With an effort Colonel Faxon replied:

"My child, Mr. Despard has asked me for your hand, and I replied that never would you consent to become his wife."

Sharp and quickly came the response:

"You are mistaken, papa, for I will marry Mr. Despard if he has done me the honor to ask me to be his wife."

Had the lightning flashed from a cloudless sky, Colonel Faxon and Duke Despard could not have been more amazed than at her words, and she stood cool and smiling before them, with feelings of strange emotion.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COMPACT.

FROM some reason, known to herself alone, Fidèle Faxon had made up her mind to act, and to do so in a prompt manner.

She was very pale, but perfectly self-possessed, and a smile that looked forced was upon her lips.

She surprised Duke Despard by her ready acceptance of his offer of himself fully as much as she did her father.

"What can it mean?" he made the mental query of himself.

"What can she mean? Does she really love this gambler?" the colonel asked himself.

Duke Despard was the first to speak, after her bold assertion that she would be his wife, and said, as he bowed most courteously:

"Miss Faxon, your kind words give me great joy, for, loving you as I have, since I first saw you, and that love increasing with our each meeting, I yet could hardly hope that I had won your regard in return, though I hoped, by my devotion to you, to some day win your deepest affection."

"A pretty speech, Mr. Despard, and well delivered; but I have not been wholly indifferent to the one who saved my life at the risk of his own."

"You are a gambler, it is true, and yet an open one: but my father is also given to gambling, so what is a crime in one I cannot regard as a virtue in the other."

"You ask for my hand, and I pledge it to you, but upon conditions I will state."

"Name your conditions, Miss Faxon."

"First, that you never again play cards with my father."

"I make the promise."

"Second, that any business relations you may have with him, if any, you at once arrange in a manner satisfactory to both."

"I am more than willing to do so, Miss Faxon."

"Third, that you give me one year from this date before you claim me."

Duke Despard gazed fixedly at her, while Colonel Faxon stood with bowed head, as though humiliated, pained, and in the deepest quandary.

The gambler saw that Fidèle was playing no part, and he felt assured that her father had not told her of his loss at cards.

He was vain, and he could not but believe that the maiden loved him, and that after all, his plot to keep Don Chetwynd from winning her, had been but to drive the doctor to suicide and impoverish the son.

The terms proposed by Fidèle he was willing to agree to, except the third, and that was to wait one year before marrying her.

"There may be a plot in this, and life is uncertain, so I must not permit this delay," he thought.

So he said quietly:

"Miss Faxon, the first two terms I agree to; but let me say to you that I am not one to delay, and we must compromise upon the third."

"I can see no compromise, sir, that can be made."

"Let me propose one. If you are willing to marry me a year hence, you should be to-day, and I made a vow some years ago, never to engage myself to any woman, but to marry her at once, if I gave her all the time she wished afterward before I came to claim her."

"Ah! I would judge that you have been deceived by some woman, Mr. Despard?"

He thought that he detected a sneer in her tone, but answered:

"I have been."

"Well, sir, what is your compromise?"

"There is a clergyman, one whom your father knows well, upon the boat. Send the carriage for him, let your father explain that you wish to enter into a secret marriage with me, for certain reasons to remain unknown, and he can unite us."

"When he returns to the boat I will accompany him, and until one year from this date, I will not come to claim you as my wife, will not allow the secret to be known, and—"

"But, Despard, my daughter will not surely enter into a secret marriage with you with my consent," urged the colonel.

"If she is willing, it will certainly be to your advantage, Colonel Faxon, to consent."

"Here in this envelope is my bridal gift to Miss Faxon, and I place it in your keeping for her, Colonel Faxon."

The old army officer knew well to what he referred, the tell-tale papers he held of his, and he looked pleadingly toward Fidèle.

She met his gaze with a smile, and spoke not.

"If she yields I am saved," he murmured.

"What has Miss Faxon to say?" asked Duke Despard, in his soft, pleasant way.

"If she accepts, I will see that she is free of him before the year ends," murmured the father.

At last Fidèle spoke, and her voice was firm, though she was deadly pale.

"Place that envelope with its contents in my father's hand, Mr. Despard, and I consent."

Instantly Despard obeyed, and the colonel clutched it eagerly.

"Remember, colonel, that envelope contains property I now give to my wife, one year hence."

"I understand, sir."

"And now will you send your carriage after the clergyman, who is the Reverend Doctor Perry."

The colonel turned to Fidèle, who said:

"Do so, father, for I will consent to the ceremony, if Mr. Despard pledges his honor that it is to remain a dead secret between we three and Doctor Perry."

"I so pledge my honor, Miss Faxon; for one year it shall be a secret between us, unless you sooner wish it known."

"Thank you, sir, and I will order the carriage sent to the boat after the clergyman," and going into the house Fidèle told Uncle Zeke to send James the coachman at once to the steamer and request Doctor Perry to drive up to the mansion.

The moment she had left, Colonel Faxon said eagerly.

"My notes are in this envelope, Despard?"

"All of them, sir; see for yourself."

"I thank you, for once more I am a man again."

"Try and remain so by resisting the temptation to gamble," was the curt reply, and the colonel's eyes flashed at the words; but just then Fidèle returned and the conversation was led by her upon subjects wholly removed from the secret marriage to be entered into.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SACRIFICE.

AFTER a short delay at the boat, the Faxon carriage was seen returning toward the mansion, and in it was the clergyman, whom both Colonel Faxon and Fidèle had often met before.

He was greeted most warmly, seemed surprised to see Duke Despard a guest at The Retreat, for he well knew who the gambler was, and on one occasion had buried one of his vic-

tims at the card-table, the husband of Estelle Enders, who, the reader will remember, fell by the hand of the Ruby King.

Seeing the surprised look of the clergyman, had his life depended upon it, Colonel Faxon could not have spoken upon the subject of the secret marriage, and seeing his emotion, Fidèle said:

"Mr. Despard, will you kindly explain to Doctor Perry why we asked his presence here?"

"If Colonel Faxon cares not to do so, certainly."

The colonel motioned for him to speak, and in his pleasant way he said:

"Doctor Perry, it is for a clergyman to witness many strange scenes, in the performance of his duties, and hence he is one who must keep the secrets of those whom he may be called upon to serve, and I beg you to keep from every one what may transpire now, until Miss Faxon gives you the permission to break your silence."

"Certainly, sir, I will do as I am requested in the matter, if it is also the desire of Colonel Faxon and his daughter," was the answer.

"It is my wish, Doctor Perry, and my father's."

"Do I so understand it, Colonel Faxon?" and in answer the planter said simply:

"Yes."

"Then I shall keep inviolate what may be told me."

"There is nothing to tell, sir, but Miss Faxon has agreed to enter into a secret marriage with me—"

"God forbid!"

Fervently the words broke from the clergyman's lip.

"I know, Doctor Perry, that I am not one who has gained favor in your eyes; but we are not all saints in this world, and I do not deny that I come under the name of sinner, perhaps worse; but Miss Faxon has promised to become my wife to-day, but not to be acknowledged as such for one year."

"Until the year has passed I will not claim her, or seek her society, and hence we desire a secret marriage for reasons we cannot now explain."

"Seeing you on board the Princess, I suggested that you would unite us, and both Miss Faxon and her father have consented."

"This is a very strange affair, and am I to understand that it has your sanction, Colonel Faxon?" said the surprised clergyman.

"It has."

"And yours, Miss Faxon?"

"Yes, Doctor Perry."

"You enter into this secret marriage with—this—"

"Say it right out, my dear doctor—with this gambler," said Duke Despard, pleasantly.

"Well, sir, as you seem to like the word, I will ask you again, Miss Faxon, if you are willing to enter into a secret marriage with this man, known to be a professional gambler, and by many said to be worse?"

"It is my wish, sir," was the firm response.

"Then I can but unite you, as you desire, so, Colonel Faxon, may I ask you for the loan of a Prayer Book?"

Colonel Faxon bowed, arose in a tired way and entered the mansion, failing to see the crouching form of the quadroon Trip, half-concealed in the window drapery, the very place where her mistress had been sitting and heard all that had passed between her father and Duke Despard.

Returning, the colonel handed Doctor Perry the Book of Prayer, and Duke Despard and Fidèle took their stand before him.

Colonel Faxon, stern, silent and with eyes downcast, stood near, and when asked the question:

"Who gives this woman to wed this man?"

He answered in a voice so low that the question was repeated.

"I do," he then said firmly.

When the clergyman asked for the ring, Duke Despard started, hesitated an instant, and then drawing from the little finger of his left hand the superb ruby he wore there, slipped it upon the wedding-finger of Fidèle ere she was aware of his act.

Her face, pale before, flushed as scarlet as the magnificent gem, and then the blood retreating left her almost livid, while for a moment she trembled violently.

A few words more and the marriage had ended, while Colonel Faxon faltered forth:

"That is hardly an appropriate wedding-ring, Despard."

"As you wish the marriage unknown, Colonel Faxon, perhaps such a ring may serve to better keep the secret," the clergyman suggested.

Then they parted, without a word of congratulation to the man, or wish of happiness for the bride, and though wine was at hand, no toast was drank.

"Doctor Perry, permit me to offer as a fee, sir, for the poor of your parish, this roll of bills—nay, do not refuse it, for should you decline money because it is gained by gambling, and in other questionable ways, you would have to accept that only fresh from the mint, or press, as

who of us know what the money we put in the contribution-box at church, has passed through before coming into our hands.

"Pray accept it, sir. There are five thousand dollars in that roll, and though from the hands of a gambler it may relieve much want among your people."

The words, the manner of Duke Despard impressed the honest-hearted clergyman, and he answered:

"I accept it as you give it, Mr. Despard, and I pray that some day I may meet you a different man from what unfortunately you now are. But, there blows the whistle for our recall."

"Father, will you not see Doctor Perry and Mr. Despard to the steamer?" said Fidèle.

"Perhaps I had better walk, and alone, as it will not look well to see a saint and Satan together, for I have heard you justly spoken of, Doctor Perry, as saint-like," and Duke Despard's first words were spoken most bitterly.

"My dear sir, it is my duty as a clergyman to battle with Satan, and I am not afraid of being seen in your company, for no one would suspect me of being enticed into a game of cards with you, any more than they would believe that I had led you out of your wicked ways."

Duke Despard laughed at this, and the carriage coming around, the clergyman shook hands with Fidèle, the gambler merely raised his hat, and the vehicle drove away with Colonel Faxon accompanying them.

A moment Fidèle stood gazing after them, and then she turned slowly, tottered up the steps of the piazza and would have fallen had not Trip suddenly leaped through the low window and caught her in her arms, while she said in a tone of deepest compassion:

"Poor Missy Fidèle! she has fainted, but nobody shall know it, that is certain."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GOLDEN WEB.

As a dream of Oriental luxury were the rooms of Lady Lulu, the Queen of Fortune—the Lady of Luck.

They were situated in a large stucco building, fronting on a secluded street, and the occupants of the several stylish residences upon either side did not know who it was that dwelt in such perfect seclusion from all the rest of the world.

A pretty yard, with a gate kept locked, was in front of the massive building, in one side of which was a carriage entrance, heavy doors always kept closed, except to allow the egress and ingress of a most stylish turnout, consisting of a pair of spirited black horses, a silver stud-drawn harness drawing a victoria, and with two negroes in black livery, silver trimmed upon the box.

Each afternoon, when it was pleasant, this carriage emerged from the double doorway and halted at the little gate, which a servant in livery opened for a lady who passed out and entered the vehicle for a drive.

She was always dressed in black, and her face was concealed by an impenetrable Spanish vail, greatly to the disgust of those who wished to behold her features.

Her form was seen to be exquisite, and she walked with the air of a queen.

Now and then, in the morning, she would emerge from the carriage entrance mounted upon a beautiful, snow-white horse, and accompanied by a negro groom, dash away for a ride, but she still wore that Spanish vail that kept her face from view.

She rode superbly and fearlessly, and many were the glances of admiration cast upon her as she dashed along the fashionable drives, but who she was no one knew, and guessing solved not the mystery.

Some of her curious neighbors had kept close watch upon her, but no visitor had been seen entering her home, and excepting her coachman and groom no one ever attended her.

Curious as the gossips were, they had never discovered the fact that the home of this mysterious lady, though on one street, connected with the Golden Chance Salon on the other, and so no one suspected the fact that the "Spanish Lady" and the Lady Lulu were one and the same.

But such was the case, and the Queen of Fortune was glad to live apart from the world, as she did, enjoying her seclusion in her own beautiful home.

And beautiful it was, combining the luxury of the East with the improvements of the new world, to make life content as far as any comfort was concerned.

There was a gallery filled with choicest works of art, a hallway adorned with statuary, a library full of books, shelves and tables containing innumerable articles of *bijouterie* and bric-a-brac.

Then there was a rear piazza overhanging a garden, in which flowers bloomed continually, fountains played and birds sung merrily—a miniature Eden as it were.

Hammocks, divans and luxurious easy-chairs invited repose, where one could gaze upon the little Eden and enjoy it to the heart's content.

A vast bedchamber and *boudoir* opened upon this piazza, and beyond was a dining-room, the sideboard weighted with silver.

Still further on was a piano, a harp, and guitar, all seemingly kept in constant use by the fair mistress of the abode.

Half a dozen black servants were at the beck and call of their mistress, and they treated her with the respect they might have shown to a goddess.

Returning from her drive one afternoon, the Lady Lulu threw aside her mantilla and vail, but the network mask still remained upon her face.

"Dinner awaits you, Lady Lulu," said a venerable-looking negro, appearing at her door.

"I will come at once, so request Monsieur Bronson to join me at the table," she returned, speaking, as the negro had, in French.

After her maid, a negress, had arranged her toilet, she swept into the dining-room, and Bird Bronson arose from an easy chair, where he was reading, to meet her.

He led her to her seat with an air of elegant courtesy, and as he sat opposite to her asked:

"Did you enjoy your drive, Lady Lulu?"

"Greatly; I went to the lake."

"You still refuse to allow me the pleasure of accompanying you?" he asked.

"Yes, for I do not care to break the charm of loneliness."

He bit his lip, and for some moments neither spoke, while each ate of the delicious repast set before them.

After the dinner was over and the servants had withdrawn, Bird Bronson offered his arm and led Lady Lulu into the parlor, when she seated herself at the piano and ran her fingers over the keys with the touch of an expert.

"You can smoke if you wish," she said, lazily, and his answer was as quiet:

"Thank you, I should like to."

Lighting a fragrant cigar he took a seat at the open window, overlooking the little garden, and smoked away in silence, while Lady Lulu, tiring of the piano, seated herself by her harp, and began to sing a plaintive ballad in a rich soprano voice that rivaled the notes of the mocking-bird trilling without, in sweetness.

Leaving the ballad unfinished she arose and approaching the window sunk down upon a silken ottoman near the gambler, while she asked:

"Bronson, who is that gentleman that played several nights at the Golden Chance last week?"

"That is rather a difficult question to answer, Lulu, as there were many playing there."

She turned her head impatiently and said:

"You are aware that I know all the frequenters of the place, and the friends they now and then bring; but this was one who has seldom been there."

"Do you refer to Duke Despard?"

"No, he is a gambler; this one was not, from his style of playing."

"Ah! you doubtless refer to that young naval officer, Don Chetwynd?"

"He was dressed in deep black and was the handsomest man I ever saw."

"Indeed! that is a broad assertion for a woman who has seen as many men as you have seen."

"I mean it, for he has a noble face, one to love and revere, while his form is the perfection of manly beauty, and his manners are courteous in the extreme."

"Indeed! he seems to have made an impression upon you that is dangerous to your peace of mind."

"Don't sneer, Bronson; but, to tell the truth, I was impressed with him. I noticed that he played as though studying a game, and risked his money seemingly for a purpose. The next night he came he improved, and rapidly, and he stopped awhile at each table, trying every game in that studied, calm way, and I became interested in him; but he has not been there very lately. Who is he?"

"I told you his name was Chetwynd."

"Ah yes, and it was his father who was driven to suicide through losing his fortune to Duke Despard?"

"Yes."

"He is in the navy?"

"He was, but has resigned."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you."

"He is now poor, then?"

"So it is believed, and yet I have it from a good source, and as a secret, that he is a very rich man, having gotten a fortune from some source which he keeps to himself."

"Indeed?"

"So I learned, and you can readily find out."

"How?"

"Try your powers of fascination upon him; lure him into a game with you, and, my word for it, you will win his last dollar."

"Why should I?"

"Why should you win any man's money, but for the getting of it, and for what it will bring?"

"True."

"If you do not do so then Duke Despard will ruin him, and it might as well go into the bank of the Golden Chance as into the pocket of the Ruby King."

"That is so; but will he play with Despard, think you?"

"Despard bowed to him the other night and he returned it, though coldly; but Despard means to yet get him into a game with him and ruin him as he did his father."

"I would not be surprised, Bronson."

"Then do you win what he has, be it a great or small sum."

"I shall try."

"Try? You know *your* luck never fails you; you have won everything you have ever played for."

"Excepting one thing, which I can never win."

"What is that?"

"Happiness."

He started at the utterance of the word, moved uneasily, threw away his cigar, and rising impatiently, said:

"Come, it is time to go to the *salon*, and, ten to one, Don Chetwynd will be there to-night, for I saw that he arrived by the Princess this morning."

"Ah! I hope he will come to-night," she said, and a strange smile rested upon her beautiful mouth as she took the arm of Bird Bronson and accompanied him along the secret passage, leading from her rooms to the gorgeous den of the Golden Chance.

A few moments after she was seated in her chair on the dais, awaiting the coming of her victims.

CHAPTER XV.

THE "LUCK-STONE."

THE person whom Don Chetwynd had left Fidèle Faxon to go home and meet, had gone up to see him on some important matters of business, for he was a lawyer from the city.

The settlement of the matters kept the two occupied very closely, and as it would be necessary for the young planter to visit New Orleans soon, he decided to go back with the lawyer upon his return on the Princess, and the steamer was signaled on her run down to come into the Idlerest Landing, where both got on board.

Had Don Chetwynd been alone he certainly would have taken advantage of the long stop of the steamer at The Retreat Landing, to have gone up and called upon Fidèle, but there were numerous papers yet to go over, and the lawyer was a hard worker, so they had gone at once to a state-room and dived deep down into legal matters once more, trying to bring order out of the almost inextricable chaos in which poor Doctor Chetwynd had left things.

The Princess was backing off from the Landing when Don and the lawyer gave up their work for the day and went out upon deck.

Almost the first person that the planter's eyes fell upon was Duke Despard, standing alone, smoking a cigar, and with eyes fixed upon the Faxon home.

Don Chetwynd bit his nether lip vexatiously at sight of the gambler, and hardly returned the very polite bow of Duke Despard, while the lawyer remarked:

"But for that man, Mr. Chetwynd, your father would have died a rich man, for I suppose you know who he is?"

"Oh, yes, Judge Thatcher, it is the man I consider my father's murderer," was the reply.

"And yet he has the impudence to speak to you?"

"Oh, yes, it is like the man."

"He is a splendid looking fellow, yet as dangerous as a tiger, and as merciless, I have heard."

"So it is said of him, judge."

"Well, I am glad you did not seek a quarrel with him, immediately upon your return, as many believed you would, for he is a dead shot, a master swordsman, and, to give the fellow credit, he knows not what fear is."

"I believe he has courage, in fact he belies his looks if he has not; but is not yonder gentleman Loyd Ruggles?" and Don referred to a young man with a dissipated look, yet handsome withal and a gentlemanly bearing, who was standing near.

"Yes, it is Loyd Ruggles, and I hear that he has also fallen into Despard's clutches, having lost heavily to him."

"I have not seen him for years, but remember him as a fine, dashing fellow, but now he looks as though he had been going it pretty fast."

"He has been for a year past, and since his father's death, to the great sorrow of his young and lovely sister."

"She promised to be a beautiful woman, as I remember her."

"She is a lovely girl, and rumor has it that her brother, having run through with his inheritance, is living now upon hers and diminishing it rapidly, too."

"It is too bad, but what caused Ruggles to begin such a reckless course?"

"He was jilted it is said by Colonel Faxon's beautiful daughter, who is a terrible heart-breaker, though not intentionally so, I am sure."

Don started at this, and Judge Thatcher con-

"Loyd Ruggles loved her desperately, and she refused him, and it hurt him so deeply that he took to drink—see, he approaches us," and the young man under discussion came forward and said pleasantly:

"Has my old friend Don Chetwynd forgotten Loyd Ruggles in the five years that have past since we met last?"

"No, indeed, Ruggles, for I was just speaking of you to Judge Thatcher," and the two grasped hands warmly.

"And your sister, how is she?" asked Don.

"Well, thank you, and as pretty as she is good, though greatly distressed because I am going it so wild, Don; but then my motto is a short life and a merry one."

"Come, you and the judge join me in a drink, for it is supper time."

The invitation was accepted and the three went to supper together, after which Loyd Ruggles said:

"Now for a night at cards, for it is sink or swim with me now, and luck must change soon, as Satan has played hard against me of late."

"You play with Despard, Ruggles?" was the significant rejoinder of Don Chetwynd.

"Ah! that is good, indeed, he being the Satan that has held the winning hand against me; but I am glad the Ruby King did not hear it, or there would be trouble."

"I neither seek or avoid trouble with Despard, Loyd; but I must decline your invitation to play to-night."

"And you, judge?"

"Nor can I accept, Ruggles, as I never play for more money than to make it interesting, and with you and Despard in the game the stakes will be heavy."

"Doubtless, for I play for large sums as long as I can do so."

"Well, we'll meet again," and away went the reckless young aristocrat to face the Ruby King in a game of cards.

Four persons at first sat down to the table and the bets began among the hundreds; but as they rose to thousands on the turn of a card, two withdrew, saying that the pace was too swift for them, and Duke Despard and Loyd Ruggles were adversaries.

A crowd of interested lookers-on surrounded the table, and the bets sprung from one thousand to five thousand.

As was his wont, Duke Despard sat in an easy-chair, playing with graceful indifference, seemingly, and with a cigar between his lips.

He certainly looked very calm, very nervy and exceedingly handsome, and, though he was losing steadily, he did not show any uneasiness of manner.

Suddenly he lost a large stake, which Loyd Ruggles, unable to cope with the gambler in his marble-like composure, eagerly raked over to his side with the exultant remark:

"It is my time to-night, Sir King of the Rubies."

At his words Duke Despard was seen to start, drop the cards and clasp one hand upon the little finger of his left hand.

"Your ring! have you lost it?" cried a voice.

"No, though I thought for an instant I had; but I remember now where it is, and it is not having it brings me my bad luck to-night," and he resumed the game once more, while Loyd Ruggles said:

"Well, Despard, as you are not wearing your luck-stone to-night, I make the next bet ten thousand."

"I take it, Mr. Ruggles," was the perfectly calm response.

"And I have won," cried Loyd Ruggles, excitedly, at the same time calling to a waiter:

"Brandy here, boys! Gentlemen, join me, please, and it shall be wine if you desire, for I am a cool twenty thousand ahead to-night."

The drinks were quaffed, and another game was played with like result, Loyd Ruggles again winning ten thousand.

"I think I had better cry quits, Ruggles," said Duke Despard, evidently impressed by his not having his splendid ruby solitaire, which he had placed upon the wedding-finger of Fidèle Faxon a few hours before.

"Ah! you show the white feather when you lose, Despard, while you play all night if you win."

"I feel that I have but thrown away my money, Mr. Ruggles, in playing without my luck-stone," was the quiet answer of Duke Despard, who, like all gamblers, allowed superstition to govern him.

"Despard, a few months ago you won forty thousand from me in one night, and I was not so cowardly as to cry mercy until my last dollar had gone; but now, because you, worth a million, it is said, lose thirty thousand, you fear to play."

The words were spoken crisp and resolutely, and all glanced at the Ruby King, for he was not one to have it thrown into his teeth that he feared to play.

"I was governed by my superstition, Mr. Ruggles, in declining to play more, but as you urge it I will play one more game, making the stakes thirty thousand, and win or lose, I shall play no more to-night."

"Thirty thousand it is then, and win or lose you will be a coward if you refuse to play."

A silence fell upon all, at Loyd Ruggles's words, and yet Duke Despard showed no sign of the insult hurled at him, and the play was begun and played through, and with the same result—the Ruby King had lost.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MOONLIGHT DUEL.

"THAT ends our card-playing to-night, Mr. Ruggles," said the Ruby King, as he counted out the money he had lost and handed it over to Loyd Ruggles.

"Do you mean to say that you are afraid to play more?"

"I fear nothing, Loyd Ruggles, but to-night I will not play any more."

"And this from the famous Ruby King, a man that has won fortunes without the quiver of a muscle?" and Loyd Ruggles seemed determined to cause the gambler to resent his words, or be driven into playing on.

"I have won fortunes, yes, and I have killed men for less than you have said to me to-night, Mr. Ruggles, so let us part without trouble, for I tell you I am governed by superstition to-night, not having my luck-ruby on my finger, and feel I could win no game."

Duke Despard spoke with strange calmness, and it was evident that, without the ring, his luck-stone, as he called it, he would not care to either play or face a foe in deadly combat.

Cutting and vicious came the reply of the young aristocrat:

"You have doubtless not got your *marked cards* with you to-night, Duke Despard."

Quick as a flash the gambler's hand had been thrust into his bosom and was withdrawn with a derringer, which would have then and there sent a bullet into the heart of Loyd Ruggles for the insulting words; but ere he could draw trigger Don Chetwynd seized his wrist in a grip of steel, and bending his arm upward said in his quiet way:

"Do not resent an insult by murder, Duke Despard, but demand of Mr. Ruggles satisfaction elsewhere."

A murmur of applause ran around the group at this, mingled with a sigh of relief at the nerve of the young planter who had prevented Duke Despard's deadly shot.

All were silent then, expecting to see the gambler turn upon the young planter; but instead he said coolly:

"Release my wrist, please, Mr. Chetwynd, and accept my thanks for staying my arm."

"You are right, sir, Mr. Ruggles must give me satisfaction for his words."

Don Chetwynd at once released the wrist of the gambler and stood back among the crowd, while Loyd Ruggles, who had not flinched at the deadly peril that faced him, said sternly:

"It was satisfaction I sought from you, Duke Despard, for the fortune you had won from me, or robbed me of, and which you were too cowardly to give me, so I am glad to see you can understand an insult, and will thus allow me satisfaction in another way."

"I am at your service, sir, when, where, and with what weapons you may select, while, if Mr. Chetwynd will act as my second, I can refer you to him."

"I decline, sir," was the stern reply of the young planter.

"And will you decline to serve me, Don?" asked Loyd Ruggles, quickly.

"No, I will act for you with pleasure," came the response.

And all glanced at Duke Despard; but he showed not that he had even heard the words, and turning to one whom he knew well, spoke a few words to him in a low tone and walked away, while Don Chetwynd and Judge Thatcher led Loyd Ruggles to their state-room.

"Don, I thank you for saving my life, and it is a premonition that Duke Despard is vulnerable, and he may fall by my hand, and thus will I avenge many."

"He won my fortune, every dollar of it, and when I came on this steamer I had but five thousand in money, all of my sister's, excepting her home in the city."

"I determined to win back my money or kill that man, and I have gotten back nearly all of poor Ruth's inheritance, and I wish you to give it to her should I fall."

"If I do not, I shall never gamble again, but go to work like a man, and here's my hand on it; but if he kills me, then you be Ruth's guardian, will you not?"

"I will do all I can for your sister, Loyd; but now tell me, when and where do you wish to meet this man?"

"I heard the captain say he was to stop to-night at Claiborne's to take on a large amount of cotton, so let us go ashore there, as it is a beautiful moonlight night, and settle the matter, giving the other passengers to believe we will wait until we reach the city."

"And the weapons?"

"Pistols are the surest, and I have mine with me, as has Despard his, for he never goes without them."

"Well, I will see his second, and we can ar-

range it to go ashore at Claiborne's Landing; but how are you as a shot?"

"Dead sure; and so is Despard."

"Well, you must not let him get a second ahead of you."

"Now, draw up any papers with the judge here you may wish acted upon should you fall."

"I will, thank you."

And leaving the two together Don Chetwynd left the state-room in search of Despard's second.

He was soon found, and all preliminaries were quickly arranged, Duke Despard remarking coolly that it suited him to have the matter quickly over so that he could get some sleep after it.

"Perhaps it may be the sleep of death, Duke," said his second, with a light laugh.

"I intend it shall be for Loyd Ruggles," came the quick retort, and Don Chetwynd left the state-room to acquaint his principal with the arrangements, which were dueling pistols at ten paces, at the landing at which the steamer next stopped.

Believing that the affair was "off" until they reached the city, the passengers all retired for the night, and soon after six persons quietly went ashore and disappeared over the high bank.

They were the duelists, their seconds, the steamer's captain and Judge Thatcher.

"Better let me arouse a physician there is on board, and ask him to go with us," had suggested the captain.

"There will be no need of his services, captain, though you might call the Reverend Doctor Perry, who is a passenger, as he would be useful in burying the dead," was the reckless remark of Duke Despard.

A short walk brought them to an open space, upon which the moonlight streamed brightly down and here they halted, the ground was quickly stepped off, the weapons loaded, and the men placed in position.

Duke Despard seemed utterly indifferent as to his danger; though he did whisper to his second:

"I have not my luck-ruby with me, and that troubles me."

Loyd Ruggles was calm, silent and nerved to the deadly peril he must meet, and he grasped the hands of Don Chetwynd, Judge Thatcher and the captain, like a man who appreciated that it might be his last farewell.

To Don Chetwynd he said in a low voice:

"Don, remember, if I die you are to see that my sister is not unprotected."

"With her home, and the money I won to-night, she will at least be well off."

"As to myself I care not for life, for I loved one who refused my love in spite of all my entreaties; but then I do not blame her, and I think of her in this moment."

"If I do die I will be content if I can carry Duke Despard with me."

"Good-by, old fellow."

Their hands were clasped once more, and then all was in readiness for the fatal moment.

Don Chetwynd had won the word, and his voice rung out as clear and stern as though issuing an order upon the quarter-deck of his vessel:

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

"Ready," sharply replied Duke Despard.

"Yes," earnestly said Loyd Ruggles.

Then followed the fatal words:

"Fire! One! two!"

The pistols flashed together, as one weapon, and Loyd Ruggles sunk backward, a bullet in his heart.

"Are you hit, sir?" cried the second of Duke Despard, as he saw the gambler step quickly backward at the shot.

"Oh, no; but it was a close call."

"Will you help these gentlemen with their friend, or shall I send some of the deck hands after the body?"

There was not a shadow of excitement, no remorse, no feeling in the tone of Duke Despard as he spoke.

"Tell the mate to send a stretcher here, please, Despard, with four men," called out the captain, and five minutes after the body of Loyd Ruggles lay hidden away in a state-room on the upper deck of the Princess, while the deep boom of the escape-pipes as the steamer plowed its way along, seemed to breathe a requiem to the dead.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRESENTIMENT OF EVIL.

UPON the arrival of the steamer in New Orleans, there were scarcely a dozen persons on board who knew of the sad tragedy that had been enacted upon the banks of the Mississippi.

They missed seeing Loyd Ruggles, but supposed he was keeping close to his state-room, not wishing to attract attention, while Duke Despard appeared promptly at breakfast the next morning and chatted pleasantly with the captain upon various topics, and no one would have dreamed that he had sent a soul into eternity only a few hours before.

Leaving Judge Thatcher to follow with the body, Don Chetwynd took a carriage and drove

at once to the home of Miss Ruggles, which was situated upon one of the fashionable thoroughfares.

It was a lovely abode, occupying an entire block, with its ornamental grounds, and a most attractive spot.

Seated upon the piazza, as Don approached, was a maiden of twenty, and she was preparing flowers, taken from a large basket, for the vases, while a young negress was assisting her.

Dressed in pure white, with a sun-hat of chip straw, Ruth Ruggles looked very beautiful, and deserved the reputation she held as one of the loveliest maidens in the city.

But her face held a sad look, for her thoughts were constantly with her erring brother, though she did not dream how deep he had gone into his gambling excesses, giving him free rein to draw upon her resources as he pleased.

Seeing Don approaching up the flower-bordered walk, she arose to meet him, and it cut him to the heart to have to wound her so deeply with the story he had to tell.

"Miss Ruggles, I presume?" he said, recognizing her, although she had grown from girlhood to womanhood.

"Yes, and now your face comes back to me from long ago—you are Lieutenant Don Chetwynd—I am so glad to see you!" and she grasped his hand warmly.

"I am Don Chetwynd, Miss Ruggles, for I have resigned from the navy, and I have come to renew our acquaintance, I regret to say, under circumstances most painful, for I come with ill-tidings."

He spoke softly and his eyes showed in them the deepest sympathy for her.

"My brother!" and she grasped his hands in a vise-like grip that showed how deeply she felt.

"It is to tell you of your poor brother that I have come, Miss Ruggles."

"He has taken his own life!"

The words dropped slowly from her lips, and she then said rapidly:

"I knew he lived a broken-hearted life, for he loved one who did not return his affection, and he became despondent, wild, reckless—Oh, God! is he really dead?"

"Your brother is dead, Miss Ruggles, but not by his own hand."

"Ah! he has been shot in a duel?" she gasped.

"He was killed in a duel with one who drove him to his death, as he did my poor father, by winning from him his fortune."

"Duke Despard killed him; but—"

He caught her in his arms, for he saw that she was falling, and bearing her to a sofa sent quickly for the family physician, while he endeavored to restore her to consciousness.

Quickly he told the family servants what had occurred, and a room was set apart for the body.

Soon the doctor arrived and Ruth was taken to her room and tenderly cared for, while the body was brought to the house which Loyd Ruggles, in the full strength of manhood had left but a few days ago, desperate and determined upon revenge against Duke Despard.

True to his pledge to the dead, Don Chetwynd devoted himself to attending to all there was to be done, remaining almost constantly at the Ruggles' mansion until Loyd Ruggles was laid to rest in the cemetery, after which he had an interview with the sorrowing sister, told her he had placed the money to her credit in the bank, and left with her the papers entrusted to him by her brother.

After telling her that she must look upon him as one to stand in her brother's place, he departed for his hotel, where Judge Thatcher was awaiting him.

"You have hardly had time, Chetwynd, to read the papers, so you do not know what is said of the duel?" said the judge, as they were seated in Don Chetwynd's rooms at the St. Charles.

"No, how is it looked upon?"

"With regret that Despard was not the victim, mostly, and the deepest sympathy for Miss Ruggles; but of course it is not known that, but for Loyd's lucky winnings that night, his sister's fortune would have been almost entirely swamped by him."

"I am glad of that; but the authorities will not move in the matter of the duel, I suppose?"

"No; it was on Mississippi soil, you know, and Louisiana laws do not reach the participants, while Despard will go, as before, scot free; but reference is made to you, and the hint thrown out that some day Duke Despard will have to face you, and then he will meet his match."

"I am sorry for this notoriety," answered Don, with a frown, and a moment after he added in a low tone, as though thinking aloud:

"Yes, some day Duke Despard and I will meet."

"He was up at the Golden Chance the night following our arrival," said the judge.

"No, was he as brazen as that?"

"Yes, and played faro, roulette and other games, winning at all heavily."

"Ah! did he play against the Lady of Luck?"

"No, he passed her by, saying with a laugh

that he was not wearing his luck-ruby, but would the next night, and try his fortune with her."

"Did he play the next night?"

"Yes, and wore his ruby ring, won at all the tables, then played against the Lady Lulu and lost."

"That woman has marvelous luck, judge."

"It is phenomenal, or—"

"Or what?"

"She cheats."

"I cannot believe it of her, for her face, as much as I have seen of it to study, is strangely beautiful and honest."

"So I think; but she never loses."

"True, but I believe it is her good fortune."

"It may be; but, by the way, did you see Despard this afternoon?"

"No."

"On the way to the cemetery with poor Ruggles?"

"No, did he dare show himself there?" indignantly said Don Chetwynd.

"I do not think that it was done on purpose, and yet it might have been, for he is a man to stop at nothing."

"What did he do?"

"It was just at the gateway leading into the cemetery, and he was coming along at a gallop, saw the funeral, and wheeled into the half-circle to prevent crossing it, when he faced the hearse, raised his hat, and sat motionless until the last carriage passed, his face bowed with seeming respect."

"This is remarkable."

"I thought so; but there were two others thus caught in the circle, the mysterious lady whom you have doubtless heard of as the 'Vailed Nun,' the 'Spanish Beauty,' and the 'Vailed Unknown'?"

"Yes; I have heard of a lady of great mystery, who drives and rides alone, always vailed."

"And no one can find out who she is, nor has she ever been seen in company with any man, other than her negro groom."

"She wheeled her horse to one side, her negro groom dropped behind her, his hat off, and with her head bowed she awaited the passing of the funeral procession, being but a few paces from Duke Despard."

"Looking back, as we followed the winding road in the cemetery I saw, as the last carriage passed, Duke Despard resume his hat, then turn to her, raise it politely, and they rode off together, the negro groom dropping back in the rear."

"Then this mysterious lady is known to Despard?"

"It would seem so, or he had the audacity to speak to her without knowing her."

"I have heard that no other man dared do so."

"So it is said; but they certainly rode off together toward the lake, for I watched them as far as they were in sight."

"Judge, I have felt no curiosity before in this vailed lady, but now that you tell me what you do regarding Despard's meeting her, I shall become interested, for, strange as it may seem to you, all that the Ruby King does is of the deepest interest to me."

And Don Chetwynd spoke in a low, earnest tone, that showed he meant all he said.

A moment after he added:

"Judge, I shall go to the Golden Chance to-night."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; I wish to try my luck."

"What a strange interest you have developed of late, Chetwynd, in gambling."

"Yes; I have become deeply imbued with the spirit of gaming of late, it is true, and I intend to-night to try my luck against that of the fair Queen of Fortune."

"You'll be worsted badly, Don."

"I can but try, judge, and if I fail, I will but be another of Lady Lulu's victims."

"Yes; if misery loves company, you will have plenty of it," laughed the judge, who, as an ex-member of the bench, and a lawyer of eminence, had long been the attorney of Doctor Chetwynd.

"Judge, I feel a trifle blue, and need exercise, so I'll ask you to excuse me while I take a gallop on horseback to the lake and back?" said Don, after half an hour spent in poring over legal documents.

"It would do you good, Don, so go; but take my advice and go armed."

"Why should I?"

"Well, I think it best, for somehow I feel you will need a weapon some day, and it is always best to be prepared."

"You fear treachery from Despard?"

"I hardly know; but I believe in presentiments, and as you are a fearless fellow, I have had one of evil to you, so go prepared."

"I will, if you wish it; see, I shall take this little derringer."

And thrusting the tiny, gold-mounted, but deadly weapon into his pocket, Don Chetwynd prepared for his ride, and half an hour after was dashing swiftly along the shell road to the lake, little dreaming of the thrilling adventure he was to meet with ere his return.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DUKE DESPARD'S ALLY.

As Judge Thatcher had told Don Chetwynd, the Ruby King had appeared at the Golden Chance on the evening of the day of his arrival in the city, after his meeting with Loyd Ruggles.

He had, after landing, driven to his rooms and then taken a carriage out to the pretty home of Estelle.

While he was on the river Estelle seemed to have no jealous fear of him, and so had rested content until his return; but, when she welcomed him back it was with a dread that he would be near the Queen of Fortune again, and she became morose and seemed disinclined to be pleasant.

But she ordered lunch, and while eating it Duke Despard told her of his fatal duel with Loyd Ruggles.

"Oh, Duke, what danger you have been in," she cried, forgetting her ill-humor and turning pale.

"My life is one of deadly peril, Estelle," he said, indifferently.

"And you were not hurt?" she asked, anxiously.

"No; but it was a close shave with death—here is a keepsake for you."

And he tossed a flattened bullet upon the table before her.

"What is this, Duke?"

"The bullet from Loyd Ruggles's pistol; it flattened itself on the hilt of my dirk, which I wore just over my heart; keep it."

"Oh, Duke!"

And she threw her arms about his neck and burst into tears, while she said between her sobs:

"How near to death you were."

"No nearer than when you twice tried to kill me, Estelle, and would have done so but for Don Chetwynd."

"You must regard him most highly for saving your life, Duke."

"I hate him!" came fiercely from his lips.

"Duke!"

"I mean it. I hate him!"

"But why?"

"For many reasons; but we will not speak of that now."

"And he was the second of the man you killed, you say?"

"Yes; and I wish he had stood in Ruggles's place, and some day he may, for I have a longing to meet him face to face, when it will be fair play and no favor."

"Duke, I liked Mr. Chetwynd's face and admired his cool manner with you, and it seems strange that you should hate a man to whom you certainly owe your life, for I would have killed you, Despard, but for him."

"I well know that; but, Estelle, am I to understand that you are to watch my movements, or have me watched while in the city, from some silly idea of your own about my fancy for another woman?"

"I will not have you watched, Duke, but beware not to let me find that you are deceiving me, for I am as revengeful as an Indian in my nature."

"I have no desire to deceive you, Estelle, and if you cannot trust me we had better part."

"No! no! no! it would kill me to live without you, Duke," she pleaded.

"Then place confidence in me, and believe me, when I say that in going to the Golden Chance to play, I do so for a particular purpose."

"Like you, I am revengeful, and I wish to wreck Bird Bronson's bank."

"Well, Duke, keep away from the fair Queen of Fortune, or she will wreck you."

"It is my great aim to break her luck, or prove her a fraud, a cheat, Estelle."

"No one that has ever tried it has been successful."

"You seem to know a great deal about this Queen of Fortune."

"I do not know as much as I could wish; but where is your ruby ring, Duke?"

He changed color and he knew it, so said quickly:

"You frightened me, Estelle, for every time I notice it is not on my finger, I have started, fearing I had lost it."

"But where is it?"

"At the jeweler's being reset; I left it there before going up the river."

"I wonder that you were not killed, Duke, in that duel, when you did not have your luck-ruby on," she said with real superstitious awe in tone and manner.

"Yes, I did have bad luck in playing with Ruggles, and wished to stop, and that led to the duel; but I sent the bullet straight to his heart, and you have the one aimed at mine; but I must go now, so good-by, little woman," and a few moments after he was driving rapidly back to his rooms in the city.

His second, by invitation, dined with him and then the two set out for the Golden Chance, Duke Despard saying on the way:

"Thurston, I wish you to let me go into the salon alone, and when you enter keep your eyes and ears open to all that is said about me to-night."

"I will, Despard," said Fred Thurston, a young profligate who was living upon an income his old mother allowed him, but was voted a "good fellow" by those who knew him as he appeared, and not as he really was.

"If we are in each other's neighborhood nod, but do not speak, and when you leave go to my rooms and await me."

"Is there anything up of importance, Despard?"

"There may be."

"Count me in."

"You need money do you not?"

"You fairly read my thoughts, Despard."

"And are willing to earn a good sum?"

"By working?" asked Fred Thurston in a tone of horror, for he was as lazy as a Turk.

"Not manual labor, Thurston, but a little brain work—scheming I might say."

"I'm with you."

"I will pay you well if I need you; but here we are, so I will go on alone," and Duke Despard walked rapidly on to the Golden Chance, a hum of surprise greeting his arrival, for the news of the duel was now the talk of the town.

Bird Bronson greeted him in his usual way, asking casually:

"How was your luck on the river this run, Despard?"

"Poor with gold, but good with lead," was the significant reply.

"So I have heard; but do you play to-night?"

"That is what I came for."

"Rouge et noir?"

"Not now, for I shall try roulette first and then some of the other games!"

Walking up to the roulette table he threw down a roll of bills and drawing the "chips" over to him began to play in his quick, reckless way, while many stood regarding him.

His hand was as firm as iron, his face showed no emotion whatever, and his luck was surprising.

After winning a large sum he walked over to the faro bank, and in half an hour left it a winner.

From table to table he drifted in an indifferent manner, his luck still following him, until he approached the Queen of Fortune.

But here he did not play, and soon after took his departure, going to his rooms, where Fred Thurston was not long in joining him.

"Ogre, a good supper for us, quick," he said, to the deformed negro, and then turning to Thurston asked:

"Well, what did you learn?"

"The feeling is very bitter against you, Despard, for killing Ruggles."

"Indeed! do they suppose I am to put up with insult?" he asked, with anger.

"They say that you always have the law on your side, but if you made a miss the hangman would be your last friend."

"Ah! this is the way they talk about me, is it?"

"It is well to know just how one is appreciated by his fellow-creatures."

"And some seem to connect your name with Don Chetwynd's."

"As how?"

"Well, they say that one day he will call you to a reckoning."

"Some day! that is always the cry."

"Well, I am willing for the reckoning, for, poor as he is, I fear he may prove a dangerous—but no, I will not speak of that," he added, quickly, as though he had given vent to words he had not wished to utter, and he muttered to himself:

"No, no, she is bound to me now, and I need not fear him."

Then aloud he said to his companion:

"Tell me, Thurston, what do you know of this Lady Lulu?"

"Next to nothing."

"Do you know anything?"

"Only that her name does not belie her, as I know to my sorrow."

"Who is she?"

"Nobody knows."

"Well, there is a thousand dollars, please use it for me in finding out."

"I will do the best I can."

"Is she Bronson's wife?"

"Sometimes I have thought so, and again I believe she is his sister."

"There is another mysterious lady in town, Thurston."

"Yes, the Spanish Hermitess."

"Another name for her; well, who is she?"

"Who knows?"

"Try and find out, for here is another thousand, and bring me word day after to-morrow here, by ten o'clock."

"I'll do my best," and after a hearty supper, most generously washed down with liquors, Fred Thurston took his leave and Duke Despard sought his couch with the air of a man at peace with all the world, and, by his iron will driving off the haunting specters that crowded upon his memory.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PLEDGE AND A RESOLVE.

WHEN Trip, the quadroon maid of Fidèle Faxon, caught her mistress in her strong arms,

she bore her to her room, and quickly, by the use of restoratives and rubbing her hands, brought her back to consciousness.

With a weary sigh Fidèle opened her eyes, and seeing Trip, said softly:

"Who brought me here?"

"I did, missy."

"I fainted, did I not?"

"Yes, missy, you just swooned, and so I brought you here, for I didn't wish no one to see you for fear it might frighten them," and Trip told her story unblushingly, having determined to keep her own counsel.

"You are a dear good girl, Trip."

"So Uncle Zeke says, Missy Fidèle."

"Oh, Trip, you are flirting with old Uncle Zeke, I verily believe," and Fidèle tried to cast off the gloom upon her heart.

"Lor', Missy Fidèle, I wouldn't do such a thing for the world, for I like Uncle Zeke, as a grandpa," and Trip laughed in her musical way, while Fidèle arose and walked to the window.

"My father is returning, I see, so I will go down and meet him; but do not speak to any one of my having fainted from—from—I guess I was laced too tight, Trip."

"Maybe so, missy," was the innocent answer while Trip thought:

"I guess I know the cause, but I'll keep dark as old Uncle Zeke's face."

As Colonel Faxon returned his daughter met him at the door, and she smiled a welcome, though she was very pale.

"My child, tell me why you sacrificed yourself this afternoon as you did?" he said, tenderly.

"Was I not right in so doing, father?"

"That remains for your own conscience to say; but you surely do not love the man?"

"I cannot say that I do, sir."

"Then why did you bind yourself to him by bonds that cannot be broken?"

"Death may sever those bonds within a year; but if not, it is better that I school myself to accept my fate, than that you should suffer at the hands of that man."

"Good God! what do you know, Fidèle?"

"All."

"Tell me."

"That your mania for gambling, father, placed you in that man's power, and he held the winning hand and won the game."

"My child, I have grievously erred against you."

"Do not err again, father."

"Can you forgive me?"

"He has no hold upon you now?"

"None."

"You have not a note or mortgage out?"

"I have not."

"And your bank account?"

"Is drawn to the last dollar, for I lost that first."

"You ask me to forgive you?"

"From my heart I do, my noble child."

"Pledge your word to me that you will gamble no more."

"I will, Fidèle, so help me Heaven!"

With a glad cry she threw herself into her father's arms and said:

"Now I can be happy."

"No; not until you are freed from the chain you this day put about your neck to save me."

"Wait, father, and let matters remain as they now are, for time evens all things."

"You shall never be claimed by that man, Fidèle."

"Wait and see, for I may learn to love him," and her last words were uttered bitterly.

"Never! you can never love him, for I know where your heart is, and—"

"There, there, dear papa, let us not speak upon this subject again—Hark! there is the tea-bell, so let us forget what has happened."

Forget! can I ever forget? groaned Colonel Faxon, as he led his daughter to the tea-room.

It was late that night before the planter retired to rest.

He was worried about money matters, he was pained that he had caused Fidèle to sacrifice herself as she had.

He had not told her the whole truth about his gambling debts, for he owed one of ten thousand dollars, simply a verbal promise to pay, with no written I. O. U.

This he must soon pay, he knew, and there were purchases he wished to make in the city.

He had overdrawn at his commission merchants and checked his entire bank account, so he knew not which way to turn.

There were a couple of thousand due his cousin, Miss Phoebe, within ten days, and it was interest-money which she always wished the day it was due, though she never spent one-tenth of her income.

"I do not care to put my notes in bank, nor to ask a loan of my commission merchants; but I must have about twenty thousand in cash."

"If it was not for my pledge to Fidèle I might take a run on the river and win some money; but no, I have sworn off, I have done with gambling."

"Ah! I have it! I will go to that old scamp they call Judge Joslyn, and he can arrange a plan for me to get it, by paying him a good bonus."

"I will ride over after breakfast in the morning and see the old fraud," and with this determination the colonel went to bed and found no difficulty in going to sleep.

The next morning after telling Fidèle that he was going to the village, he mounted his horse and rode over to see the judge.

Now this same Judge Jeremiah Joslyn was a character in his way.

He had been born a gentleman, but becoming impecunious he had degenerated into what is known as a "dead beat."

His "plantation," as he was wont to call it, once comprised a thousand acres, but he had sold it off to raise funds, until he had but a hundred left.

His house was in the last stages of dilapidation, not having seen paint, or been repaired for long years, while the outbuildings were leaning *à la* the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

An old horse, which the judge called his war-steed, and a couple of mules were grazing on the alleged lawn, while several cows and some pigs were in a pasture beyond.

Having in his early life been a corporal in a militia company he always referred to himself as "Colonel" in speaking of his military service, while he got his title of judge from being at one time a justice of the peace for a short term.

He was a short, stout man, with a face as clean-shaven as a priest, a complexion rosy from the generous use of old rye, and small, black, cunning eyes, that showed intelligence as well.

He dressed in the old style, with blue swallow-tailed coat, brass buttons, a white beaver hat, surrounded by crêpe, *in memoriam* his better half who had died some years before, and a standing collar and stock.

A velvet vest, crossed by a huge watch-chain, and low shoes with buckles of silver, completed his attire, to which was added a heavy cane with a gold head.

Such was the individual that Colonel Faxon found seated upon his rickety piazza as he rode up the next morning.

"Ho, colonel, glad to see you, sah! John, you lazy black imp, come and take the colonel's horse," yelled Judge Jeremiah Joslyn, and in response a negro boy came flying around the corner of the house and seized the bridle, while his teeth looked like a row of tombstones on a dark night.

"Colonel, will you walk into the parlor, sah, or will you be seated on the piazza?"

"It is house-cleaning day, sah, and perhaps it would be better for us to sit out here," and the judge concealed the poverty of his parlors by a lie, for "house-cleaning" was seldom indulged in at "Barrister Hall," as he called his place.

The colonel took a seat on the piazza, and the judge continued:

"I feared, colonel, you never intended returning my call on you, made some years ago, I believe, but better late than never, sah, and, as a gentleman of the old school, sah, I bid you welcome to my den of Barrister Hall."

"I thank you, Judge Joslyn, but I rode over to see you upon a matter of business," said the colonel, in an embarrassed way.

"Certainly, sir."

"And I wish it to be private, sir."

"By all means, sir, by all means, for a true attorney never gives away his client's secrets, while, as a gentleman of the old school, sah, I could never betray a dear friend."

Colonel Faxon shuddered at the suggestion of friendship with such a man, but said:

"Well, judge, I wish to raise some money, and I do not care to do so through my brokers, or the bank."

"I see, colonel, and you wish me to lend it to you?" pompously said the little man.

"Yes, if you can do so."

"Well, just now I have no investments that I can call in, without a heavy loss, but I have a friend in the city who might arrange it."

"That will do if I can get it."

"He will charge a good interest, colonel."

"That I am willing to pay."

"About what sum, sah?"

"Say twenty thousand dollars, for six months, on security which I will give you a list of."

The judge fairly started at the sum named, but said:

"As a gentleman of the old school, sah, I regret I cannot give you a check for the amount, without interest, as a token of my esteem; but just now, as I said, I am unable to do so, and so must call upon my friend, Jacob Judah—"

"A Jew?"

"Yes, Colonel Faxon, he is one of the wandering Tribes of Israel, but a square man, whom I can recommend as safe, safe as a tomb, and when a gentleman of the old school recommends a man you may be sure that he can be trusted."

"When can you have him here?"

"I can write him to-day, and he will be here within the week."

"Do so, please, and send him this list of security, asking him to bring the money with him."

"When he arrives, please send word over to The Retreat at what hour I may expect you to call."

"I'll do so, colonel; but do not think of going."

"I must ride by the village, thank you, judge, so must be off."

"Not until you have tried a glass of old brandy, whisky or wine, sah, for a gentleman of the old school cannot let a guest depart without drinking his health—which shall it be, colonel, for I have every kind of liquor you can think of, and wines that have been in my cellar since my boyhood, but I would particularly like to have you try the whisky, some that is twenty years old if it is a day."

"I prefer whisky, judge."

The judge called out in a loud tone:

"James! Henderson! Sophy! Martha! Why, where under heaven have all my slaves gone?"

"I will find some one of them," and he disappeared in-doors, well knowing that besides an old negress in the kitchen, her husband in the field, and the negro boy holding the colonel's horse, he had not another one to call his own, and these were under a mortgage.

Entering the house the old fraud got some really fine decanters, and filled three of them from a demijohn of whisky, pouring water into two of them to give them a different color.

Placing the three decanters upon a waiter, with glasses, he called the old negress and said:

"Sophy, after I have taken my seat bring this tray out upon the piazza, and say that I must excuse the butler's not bringing it, as he has gone to the village."

"Yas, massa."

So out went the judge, and soon Sophy followed, and made her little speech.

"James should have told me he was going, but never mind."

"There, colonel, that is the whisky I spoke of, and this is brandy, that sherry, but I would recommend the old Kentucky stand-by, for I know it is good, as I made it myself twenty-five years ago."

The colonel took the whisky, to the delight of the judge, and pronounced it very fine, which it really was.

Then he bade the old fraud adieu and rode on his way muttering:

"Well, that is settled, for he will get me the money; but I feel certain the gossips slander the judge, for I have heard that he had only three slaves to his name, and was too poor to buy a square meal."

CHAPTER XX.

A GAME OF "BLUFF."

FRED THURSTON kept his appointment with Duke Despard, and went early, for he was sure of a good breakfast, as the gambler was known to be a *bon vivant*.

He found Ogre just preparing breakfast, and hinted that he had not broken his morning fast.

"There's plenty, sah," said Ogre with a grin.

Despard was just completing his toilet, and called out cheerily to his visitor:

"Ah, Fred, you are on time."

"Sit down and make yourself at home, for we will breakfast together."

"Ho, Ogre, a cocktail for Mr. Thurston and some Vermouth bitters for me."

In a few moments Duke Despard came out of his bedchamber, moving briskly but looking a trifle haggard and pale.

"Well, Fred, here's fortune," he said, as he dashed off the Vermouth, while Thurston drank the cocktail with evident relish.

"Now I have had my bracer I am all right, so hasten with the breakfast, Ogre."

The meal was leisurely eaten, and then Despard said:

"Well, I did not see you at the Golden Chance last night, Fred?"

"No; I was on a trail that I wished to run down; but you were there?"

"Yes, and played under the inspiration of my luck-ruby."

And he held up his finger on which glittered like red fire another superb ruby.

"It does not look like the same stone, Despard."

"It has been differently set," was the quick reply.

"Well, how did you pan out?"

"Won at every table but one."

"And that one was—"

"The Queen's."

"The Queen's luck held good?"

"Yes; for I lost there all that I had won at the other tables; but tell me if you have discovered anything about her?"

"Despard, the Spanish lady goes to ride to-day about noon."

"Well?"

"She goes on horseback, with one groom, a negro."

"Her usual style."

"Join her somewhere in her ride, and speak to her as Lady Lulu."

"No!"

"Try it, for it will do no harm, for my discoveries lead me to believe they are one and the same."

"By Jove! but you may be right, Fred."

"I think I am."

"You can do no harm in making the advance"

I suggest, and can tell doubtless if I am right."

"I will do it; ho, Ogre!"

"Yes, master."

"Get out my riding-suit, and then go and order my saddle-horse sent here just at twelve."

"Yes, master."

"Which way does she ride, Fred?"

"She has a certain point on the lake she visits regularly, enjoying the ride through the woods."

"Ah! I shall join her."

"If you find I am mistaken I will try again."

"I half believe you are right; but how did you get your information?"

"By bribery, and it cost well, I assure you."

"It was worth it, if it proves true; but, Fred?"

"Yes."

"I wish you to do something else for me."

"Certainly."

"Help me to make this a certainty."

"Well?"

"Here is some money, and I would like you to get two good men, men that you can trust, to kidnap the Spanish lady."

"This is a bold act, Duke."

"I intend to play a bold game, for I will tell you where she can be taken, and then I will rescue her—see?"

"I do see that you can play other games as boldly as you do cards."

"It is all in having a good nerve, my boy; but the funeral of that poor fellow Ruggles takes place to-day, does it not?" and he asked the question as though he spoke of some dear friend.

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Well, he is out of all trouble; but here, let me make known my plans to you, Thurston," and drawing up to the table the two conversed together in a low tone for some time, the gambler handing Thurston a slip of paper upon which he had drawn some plan, and had him write a few lines at his dictation.

Soon after Thurston took his leave, and dressing himself in a stylish riding-suit, Duke Despard left his rooms and found a stable-boy awaiting him at the *banquette* with a splendid thoroughbred saddle-horse.

Mounting, he rode away, looking very handsome indeed, for he was a magnificent rider, and well knew that he was the cynosure of all eyes, though he did not show that he was in the slightest degree aware of the fact.

Riding out the shell road to the lake, by a strange coincidence, as the reader has seen, Duke Despard came upon the veiled horsewoman just as she wheeled to one side, to allow the funeral procession, bearing poor Loyd Ruggles to his last resting-place, to pass into the cemetery gate.

Hardened as he was he could not but feel remorse when he caught sight of the draped casket within the plumed hearse, and beheld the bowed, sable-robed form of Ruth Ruggles in the carriage following.

But Duke Despard was a man who held perfect control over himself, and he at once wheeled his horse near to the veiled lady, and raising his hat sat with head uncovered until the funeral passed.

Did the veiled lady know him, he wondered?

Did she know that the one who was being borne to the grave was slain by his hand?

He could not tell, but he had nerved himself to address her, and, as the last carriage wheeled slowly by, and she gathered up her reins as though to ride on, he bent gracefully with uncovered head, and said in his musical voice, which always held a strange fascination for a woman's ear:

"Lady Lulu, may I join you in your ride without presuming?"

She gave no start, as he had expected, but slightly bent her head in recognition of his bow and asked in the sweetest broken English:

"Do the señor speak Spanish, for so leetle English speak me I not understand the señor?"

"I speak Spanish very indifferently, señora, but perhaps you speak French?" he said in Spanish about on a par with the English she had answered him with.

"Oh, oui, monsieur, I speak French almost as I do my native tongue," was her ready answer.

Duke Despard spoke French fluently, and so replied in that language:

"I trust mademoiselle will pardon my addressing her, as I mistook her for a friend, Lady Lulu—Bronson," he added, after an instant of thought, not knowing what other name to give her.

The veiled lady said in response that she pardoned monsieur for speaking to her, and would permit him to accompany her for a short ride, but not very far, as she was going to a favorite place of hers along the lake-shore a few miles.

Some day, when they became better acquainted he might accompany her there, but her groom had eyes, though he spoke only Spanish.

Duke Despard was charmed with her naïvete of manner, she was so innocent, and her voice was as musical as a flute.

Her form was perfection, she rode magnifi-

cently, and her tiny gloved hand managed her horse with the greatest of ease.

"Thurston is away off in his idea, for this is no more the Lady Lulu than he is."

"The lady Lulu has red-gold hair, and this woman's hair is jet-black; but who is she?"

So mused Duke Despard to himself as he rode along by the side of the unknown lady, while her groom followed a few paces in the rear.

"What sad *cortège* was that we saw just now, monsieur, for my maid, who speaks English well, read and told me of the whole affair?"

"Yes; it was very sad."

"Did you know the young gentleman, monsieur?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"I marked your deep respect, monsieur, and most deeply did I feel for his dear sister, for he was her only protector, I believe."

"Yes."

"And who was that splendid-looking man who rode in the carriage with her—her lover?"

"No; he was her brother's second in the duel; his name is Donald Chetwynd."

"Ah, yes; my maid read of him also, monsieur, and of the cruel man who killed the young monsieur."

"Do you think him cruel?"

"I do not know him, but my maid read me how people think him merciless; but he is said to be a great gambler, and is called the King of Sports, I believe."

"Do you know him, monsieur?"

"Better than any other man, mademoiselle."

"And is he so very handsome?"

"You can judge for yourself, mademoiselle, for I am Duke Despard, the slayer of Loyd Ruggles."

The answer came terse and distinct, and the veiled lady uttered a slight cry, as of alarm, while she quickly said:

"*Au revoir*, monsieur! I must leave you now."

"*Au revoir*!"

A word to the animal she rode and he bounded away leaving Duke Despard seated upon his horse gazing after her with amazement and chagrin at her sudden and unexpected desertion of him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEETING.

"You were on the wrong track, Thurston."

So said Duke Despard when, half an hour after his desertion by the veiled lady, he drew rein alongside of a stylish buggy, drawn by a pair of spanking grays, driven by Fred Thurston.

"I do not understand, Despard," answered Thurston, who was out for a drive to the lake, and had met the Ruby King returning.

"Why, the Veiled Unknown is not the Lady Lulu."

"Odds on it—ten to one, she is."

"I take the bet."

"Have you met her?"

"Yes."

"Did you speak to her?"

"I did."

"Held conversation with her?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I met her at the cemetery gate, just as Ruggles passed in on his last ride."

"She had drawn up with respect to let the procession go by, and I wheeled alongside of her and doffed my hat."

"You have got more nerve than any man I ever knew, Despard," said Fred Thurston.

"That is not the question now under discussion."

"When the last carriage had gone by I spoke to her, and she answered in broken English, but asked if I spoke Spanish."

"That was a bluff game she was playing."

"No, I am sure not; but my Spanish is something awful, so I broke into French, and she spoke that beautifully, said I might ride with her, that she was going to some favorite spot on the lake-shore, and then began to bewail the fate of Loyd Ruggles, saying that her maid had read to her all about it, and she pitched into me until I told her who I was."

"Ah!"

"That sent her off like a rocket with an *au revoir*."

"So long as she did not say good-by, it is all right."

"So I took the *au revoir*, and I would speak to her did I meet her again; but she is not the Lady Lulu."

"Did you see her face?"

"No; it was completely veiled."

"I double my bet on it."

"I take it; but what have you done to entrap her?"

"Did you see two men pass on horseback?"

"Rough-looking fellows?"

"Yes."

"They were my men."

"And their orders?"

"To follow the lady to the woods, ambush her on her return, capture her, and kill her

negro outrider if necessary, which they will doubtless do."

"And then?"

"Take her to the hiding-place you spoke of until night, when a carriage will meet them and bring her to the city to the retreat you speak of."

"Then I must hasten to see the keeper of that retreat; but the carriage must come to Jackson Square and I will meet it, and the lady must be both gagged and blindfolded, for I wish no failure in this matter, Thurston."

"There will be none after my men capture her. I was just driving out to see if she had gone on her ride through the woods, and to find out what success you had met with, for if I had found you with her I would have called off my kidnappers, there being no use for them."

"No, she left me as though I had suddenly developed hoofs and horns."

"You've got them, Despard, but keep them well hidden," laughed Fred Thurston.

"Beware that you don't make me show them, Thurston," was the sharp response, and the young man felt that Duke Despard was not one to joke with.

"Ah, there comes some one we know," he said, quickly, anxious to change the subject, as he saw a horseman approaching at a rapid gallop.

"It is Don Chetwynd," was the cool reply.

"Yes."

"I wonder what he is after out here?"

"A gallop for pleasure, doubtless, for he is very fond of the saddle, I have heard."

"It was only an hour and a half ago I saw him pass into the cemetery with Miss Ruggles," and Duke Despard raised his hat as Don Chetwynd went by at a gallop, Fred Thurston doing likewise.

In response the young planter looked first one and then the other in the face, and with no sign of recognition kept on.

"A dead cut," said Thurston.

"Beautifully done," echoed Duke Despard, and with a word to his ally, to hasten on the kidnappers, he rode on his way toward the city.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HERMIT PRIEST.

In the oldest quarter of the city of New Orleans, at the time of which I write, there stood an old chapel in ruins.

It was surrounded by several acres of land, once a park, but now wholly run wild, weed-grown and forming a thicket that excluded the crumbling ruin from view, excepting the tower seen over the tree-tops.

Its grounds ran to the river-bank, and there on the levee was a rude arbor, where often those in boats passing near were wont to see a gown-clad form seated on a rustic bench, book in hand.

The chapel had attached to it the priest's house, also in ruins, and for many years had the good people of the vicinity shunned the desolate spot from superstitious dread, while gossips were wont to say the place was haunted.

It was said, in the long ago, that a good padre who dwelt there, had been murdered one night, and the holy edifice robbed, and from that time the place had been deserted, until a priest came there to dwell, living the life of a hermit.

Who he was no one knew, and his austere face and piercing eyes kept any one from questioning him.

His form was tall, unbent, and his hair was white and worn long, falling in waving masses upon his shoulders.

He always wore the long black priestly gown, and a sable skull-cap, winter and summer dressing alike.

Sometimes, by night, he would be seen rowing on the river in a small boat, so light that he was wont to take it from the water and carry it to the ruin when not using it.

On such occasions it was supposed that he went up to the city after provisions.

Toward sunset of the day upon which Loyd Ruggles was buried, the Hermit Priest, or padre, as he was called, was seated in his little arbor looking out over the river, and now and then dropping his eyes upon a book he held in his hand.

A boat coming close inshore did not attract his attention until it was very near him, and then a voice called out:

"Your blessing, padre."

"You have it, my son," was the response in a deep voice.

The padre's form was tall, stately, and his face wore an expression that was stern, though softened with sadness, as though he had known what it was to suffer.

He rose as the occupant of the boat shipped his oars and sprung out upon the bank and greeted him.

"My son, you are welcome," he said quietly, adding, as the boatman made the painter fast:

"Come with me to my house, or will you sit here?"

"I will go to the chapel, as I wish no curious eyes upon us, padre," answered Duke Despard, for he it was.

Together they walked along the narrow path through the thicket, to the old ruin.

It was, or had been, a small stucco chapel,

with a tower and wings, built cross-shape, with a two-storied house for the priest in the rear.

Moss hung like funeral drapery upon the trees, and the finger of Time had marked the structures with decay.

A lamp burned dimly on the altar, and this the padre never allowed to go out, by day or night, though no one visited him, he said, other than Duke Despard.

Owls flitted about the tower, and mocking-birds were trilling their evening song in the trees as the padre and Despard approached.

"Ugh! this place would give me the horrors," said the gambler.

"I like it, and on dark and stormy nights I am more content here, my son, for then all chimes in with my feelings; but come into my room and tell me how I can serve you."

He led the way into the old house, and lighting a lamp, it could be seen that the walls were bare; an iron cot and stool comprised the furniture, excepting a broad shelf which served as a table.

A crucifix hung over his bed, a few dishes were on the shelf, and several cooking utensils upon the hearth, but everything was scrupulously clean.

"Padre, you told me that you would serve me if I ever asked it of you," said Duke Despard, taking a seat upon the bed.

"Yes, my son."

"You also, in giving me a description of this old ruin, said there was a small secret chamber here?"

"There is."

"Is it furnished?"

"Yes, my son, far better than is my room."

"Could one escape from there?"

"Not after the door was closed on him, for the window is in the roof, and iron grated."

"Will you place a person in there for me for a few days?"

"An enemy?"

"No, but one whom I can gain a fortune by, once she is my prisoner."

"Ah! it is a woman?"

"Yes, padre."

"You mean her no harm?"

"None, padre."

"You pledge your word on this?"

"I do; I only wish to get from her certain information she possesses."

"Once I have this she is free."

"Suppose she refuses to tell what you wish?"

"She will do so, I am sure, if I make her believe her liberty depends upon it."

The priest was silent a moment, and then said:

"My son, I owe you my life."

"To me it is useless except for a hope that sustains me that some day it may be useful, that I may have a moment of happiness yet."

"You risked your life one night to save mine, and while I lay wounded and suffering, you cared tenderly for me."

"Had it not been for your overhearing those three men plot to come here, kill and rob me, believing I had a treasure hidden here, and boldly came single-handed to my aid, I would now be dead; so, as you ask of me a favor, I grant it, and say to you to bring the one here you wish, and I will have the secret chamber ready for her."

"Padre, I thank you."

"I will be here to-night with her, and come by boat," and soon after Duke Despard was rowing swiftly back to the city.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CABIN IN THE PINES.

WHEN the Veiled Lady rode rapidly away from Duke Despard, she kept on at a gallop for a mile or more, and then turned into the forest.

Pursuing a bridle-path that wound through the woodland, she drew rein, after a ride of several miles, in which she went at a slow pace, at a small cabin that stood in a pine thicket, and from the door of which a fine view of the lake was visible.

An old man was seated before the door, mending a fishing-net, and he was dressed in the humble garb of a waterman.

At his feet lay two large hounds, and a huge cat was perched upon one end of the bench on which he sat.

Seeing the approach of the horsewoman, he arose and called out, to some one within the cabin:

"Come out, Mam' Clo, for here is our leetle girl."

The cabin contained but four rooms, was well built, comfortable, and had about it some indications of the industry of the dwellers in it.

There was a shed in the rear, with a light spring-wagon under it, and a horse was staked out upon a grass plot near.

Chickens roamed about, looking wistfully into an inclosure which was a vegetable garden, and which was a forbidden spot to them.

A cow was grazing not far away, and down upon the shore was a small sail-canoe and a skiff.

In answer to the call of the old man a woman came to the door and looked out.

She was a woman with a serious, almost stern face, and a look of iron resolution rested upon her mouth.

In strange contrast to the man, her husband, she wore a black silk gown, a scarf about her neck, and jewelry.

As the Vailed Lady rode up to the door, the groom dismounted and seized her bridle-rein, while she sprang lightly to the ground, throwing her riding-skirt over her arm in a graceful way.

The Creoles, for such they were, met her in a pleasant way, the woman saying:

"Glad to see you, Cherie, as we always are."

"Yes, Cherie, it does my old heart good to see you," echoed the old man.

"Thank you, Papa Jean, and you, too, Mam' Clo, and I certainly am glad to come, and I enjoy my rides here and back so often."

"Still happy, girl?" asked the woman, speaking, as had each one of them, in French, the visitor dropping from her pure French into the dialect of the Creoles.

"I am happy as far as riches can make one so, Mam' Clo," was the somewhat sad response.

"Glad," was the simple reply of the woman.

"Yes, we want Cherie happy," echoed the old man.

And thus for a long time they talked together, the visitor leading the conversation, and the Creoles answering as they wished, it seemed, for at times they were loquacious, at others reserved and abrupt.

The woman brought out some Creole cakes, with a glass of wine, which the Vailed Lady ate with seeming relish, for she had drawn her veil from across the lower part of her face, displaying a perfect mouth and chin.

The groom had led the horses away, watered them at a spring, and then as though conscious that his mistress did not intend to make a long stay, had thrown himself down upon the pine needles to sleep.

The old man, with the hospitality natural to all classes in the South, had carried him out some of the cakes and a cup of wine, and hardly had he gone half a dozen steps when the visitor said abruptly:

"Mam' Clo, have you not some secret to tell me?"

The woman started, and the keen eyes, watching her closely beneath the veil, saw it.

"A secret, Cherie?"

"Yes, Mam' Clo."

"What secret have I?"

"That is what I wish to know."

"I have no secret, Cherie."

"I feel that you and Papa Jean have a secret that I should know."

"No, Cherie."

"It is a secret about myself, Mam' Clo."

"No, Cherie, we know no secret."

"Come, you are getting old, and I am just stepping across the threshold of womanhood, and I think you should tell me what I would know."

"What would you have me tell, Cherie?"

"What you know and keep secret from me."

"There is nothing, child."

Then a silence fell between the two, which the woman broke as the old man came near, with:

"You like him, Cherie?"

"As I do my servants that serve me, my horses that I ride or drive, my mocking-bird that pleases me with its song, I like him, Mam' Clo," was the response, and in a voice in which there was a tinge of bitterness.

Then turning to the old man she said abruptly:

"Papa Jean, what is the secret that you have to tell me?"

It was the old man's turn to start now, and the fair questioner saw it.

She saw that he dropped the plate and cup he carried, and stood gazing in dumb surprise at the old woman.

The latter spoke up quickly and said:

"Papa Jean, Cherie thinks we know some secret that we should tell her; but I told her there was none."

"Certainly not, Mam' Clo; there is no secret we know," mumbled the old man.

"Papa Jean, do you know that I think both you and Mam' Clo are deceiving me?" said the Vailed Woman, sharply.

"Deceiving you, Cherie, oh, no!" cried the woman.

"I feel that you are, and for some purpose, but what I cannot tell."

"If you are keeping a secret from me for money, then will I pay you double to tell me what any one else pays you to keep your lips sealed."

"You hide here in the woods in apparent want, and the few who know of your existence, and your home here, believe you are poor, almost destitute, and that your daily bread is earned by what you, Papa Jean, get by selling fish."

"But I know that you live on the best the land affords, I know that you drink the finest wines, and that you are not poor."

"Now tell me who it is that gives you gold so liberally, who it is that caters to your taste, your wishes so thoroughly?"

She spoke rapidly and earnestly, and the old

man had dropped down upon his bench, gazing at his wife with a vacant stare.

The woman's hand trembled as it rested upon her knee, and her dark face became pale.

But neither spoke a word when the veiled questioner had ceased, each one seeming to depend upon the other to say something.

"Will you not answer me, Papa Jean?"

"I don't know what to say, Cherie," he almost whined.

"Will you not answer me, Mam' Clo?"

"What shall I say?"

"Tell me who supplies you so liberally with money as to allow you to live as you do?"

"Why he gave us a present of gold, you know, Cherie."

"What he gave you would not have lasted you six months."

"You have been most liberal to us, Cherie, in giving us gold."

"Ah, Mam' Clo, you know that I have given you what would support well an old couple; but it would not buy ordinary wines for your table, as you know, and not the choicest brands that you alone drink."

"I know well how you live now, as you did in the past, and I am aware that it takes thousands to keep you in the luxury you indulge in, and have done for years."

"I am not the ignorant girl I once was, and I am aware now that you were not poor, and are not now, and I ask where do you get your gold, which you lavish so freely upon luxuries?"

"Mind you, I do not wish to deny them to you, I think you should have every luxury in your old age, and deserve something in return for this lonely life you lead here in these woods, far from your fellow beings."

"You shun the world, you seek the city only to buy provisions, Papa Jean, and you seem to be in hiding here, as though afraid to face mankind."

"In the past I knew nothing, suspected nothing, though I sat down to dinners with you that I have never seen surpassed since, even with all my riches, except in the serving of them, and right here in this cabin have I drunk wines that I know the cost of per bottle would keep a poor family a week."

"My eyes are opened now, and I say there is some reason for this, and I ask you, Mam' Clo, and you, Papa Jean, what is the secret that you keep from me?"

She had spoken slowly, watching the faces of both alternately, and they seemed to be dumb with amazement at her words.

But they made no other reply than to say in chorus:

"We know no secret, Cherie, to keep from you."

She laughed lightly and rose, placing her gold whip-handle to her lips and blowing a shrill blast, which brought her groom to his feet in an instant.

"Well, think over what I have said, and remember, whatever your secret is worth to you, I will pay you double for it."

They made no reply, and the groom coming up, the strange visitor drew her veil about her, leaped lightly into her saddle, and kissing her hand to both, rode away at a canter.

Hardly had she gone half a mile, when there came two sharp reports and her horse, and the one ridden by the groom, fell heavily, while she was thrown into the open arms of a man, who stepped out from behind a huge pine and caught her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A RESCUE.

WHEN Don Chetwynd went for his ride, it was with only a desire for exercise, which he felt the need of after his close confinement of the past few days.

He did not feel like poring over musty legal documents in his then condition, and knew that a rapid gallop of a few miles would brighten him up immensely.

He had not forgotten what Judge Thatcher had said about the brazen act of Duke Despard, in allowing himself to be seen by the mourners for poor Loyd Ruggles, and it had made the man still more despicable in his eyes.

As he approached the gambler, seated on his horse by the side of Fred Thurston's buggy, he made up his mind to ignore the bow which he felt assured Duke Despard would greet him with.

That he did so the reader has seen, as also that he coolly stared, without recognition, at Thurston, for whom he felt no atom of respect.

Dashing on out to the lake, and feeling like extending his ride, he turned along the shore and rode for several miles, watching the waves break upon the beach, and gazing out upon the blue waters, where here and there a white sail was gliding along before the balmy breeze coming in from the Gulf.

Turning in toward the woods, he allowed his horse to walk leisurely along with loose rein, his hoof-fall making no sound upon the matting of finestraw that covered the ground.

Suddenly his horse pricked up his ears and glancing ahead through the timber, Don Chetwynd beheld a man standing up against a tree.

Then another form fell under his vision, and

they seemed to be endeavoring to remain concealed, though not from him, for their backs were toward him.

On his right was a thicket, and in it he saw two horses, hitched to a tree, and their heads were enveloped in a blanket, as though to keep them from seeing and hearing.

"Those men are lying in ambush for some one; but I will spoil their little game," he said to himself, and he moved forward once more.

"Yes, a path, if I remember rightly, runs by those trees, and it leads to an old cabin back in the forest, on the shore, where an old fisherman lived."

"Ah! there is their game!"

As he uttered the words there were two puffs of smoke, two reports came to his ears, and the "game" of the ambushers was entrapped.

With a bound the horse of Don Chetwynd was urged forward, and in their excitement the men did not hear the dull thud of approaching hoofs.

As he drew near another shot was heard, and he saw one of the ambushers and one whom he had attacked struggling hard for mastery.

The other ambusher held in his strong grasp a woman.

"Hands up, my man, or die!" cried Don Chetwynd, drawing the little derringer which Judge Thatcher had insisted upon his arming himself with, and springing from his horse he advanced upon the man who held, powerless in his grasp, the slender form of the Vailed Lady.

With a cry of alarm the man turned, drew a revolver and fired; but he missed his aim, and ere he could fire again Don Chetwynd drew trigger and his bullet crashed into the brain of the villain, who sunk at the feet of the woman.

Without hesitating the young planter sprang toward the other two men, who were desperately struggling, and in an instant had his grip upon the throat of the second scoundrel, releasing thereby his grip upon the negro groom who, though wounded in the arm, was fighting bravely.

"You are my prisoner, sir!"

"Resist and I kill you!" said Don sternly, placing the muzzle of the unloaded pistol against the head of the man, who, believing the weapon loaded, sung out lustily for mercy.

"Here, my boy, blow this fellow's brains out if he moves."

And handing the harmless derringer to the groom, who received it in silence, Don turned to the lady and said, as he doffed his hat:

"I trust you received no injury at the hands of these desperadoes, for I saw your horses shot down."

"Does monsieur speak French?" she asked, and he repeated his words in that language.

Her face was still veiled so that he could not see her face, but her voice, quivering as she answered, told him that she had been greatly alarmed.

"No, monsieur, I was only terribly frightened, for it was all so sudden, and the words of that dead man told me that it was not robbery they meant, but to kidnap me for some one who had paid them to do so."

"He said if I would go quietly, he would not gag and bind me; but, oh, sir! what do I not owe to you?" and she grasped his hand in both her own.

"I am glad to have served you, lady, and, as these wretches rode here, you and your groom can return on their horses, and I will carry that man to jail."

She started at his words, seemed deeply moved from some cause, and said:

"Oh, sir, may I ask that you will serve me still more?"

"Assuredly," he replied, surprised at her manner.

"If you carry that man to jail, it must be told what has just happened here?"

"Certainly, lady, and he will be imprisoned for his crime."

"And I will have to appear against him, sir?"

"You will, lady."

"I cannot! I dare not! I will not!" she said, excitedly.

Don Chetwynd was surprised.

He recognized the lady as the one he had heard of often, but never seen, for he had not observed her as he passed into the cemetery gate.

He knew that it could only be the Spanish Unknown, and the mystery deepened about her when she did not wish to appear as the heroine of a thrilling adventure.

Had this woman committed some crime that she thus veiled her face, and dared not go to court to appear against a man who had attempted to kidnap her, he wondered?

"Why, lady, in rescuing you, and in self-defense, I was compelled to kill that man lying there, and yonder fellow is a prisoner, as you see, and should be punished."

"No, no, I pray you to let him go."

"And thus cheat justice?"

"He has been foiled by your brave act, and thus is punished, for he doubtless loses his reward, while his friend has been slain."

"Let him go, I beg of you."

"But this man must not lie unburied here."

"True, but let his comrade look after him."
 "As you please, lady; but would it not be well to find out who your foes are that have put these men up to this work?"
 "Indeed, yes, and I thank you."
 "Will you ask him?"
 "Let me first see how severely your groom is wounded."
 "Ah! is poor Pedro wounded?"
 "Slightly, I think, for failing to master him, that villain sought to kill him," and Don Chetwynd stepped toward the negro and his prisoner, the lady following him.
 "My man, are you much hurt?" he asked in a kindly tone.
 "My slave speaks only Spanish, señor," said the Vailed Lady, and instantly Don addressed the negro in that language, and received answer:
 "No, señor, a mere flesh wound in my arm."
 "I will dress it for you," and this was quickly done with the aid of his own and the lady's handkerchiefs.
 "Now, go to yonder thicket, please, and fetch here two horses that you will find hitched there."
 The negro departed on his errand, and turning to the prisoner, who stood sullenly by, Don Chetwynd said:
 "Do you wish to be set free?"
 "Indeed I do."
 "Then tell me who it was that paid you to kidnap this lady?"
 "I only wish I could; but if you wanted to know that secret you killed the wrong man," was the reply.
 "You mean that your comrade knew?"
 "He did."
 "And you?"
 "Was hired by him for to help him."
 "Is this the truth?"
 "Didn't you say you'd set me free if I'd tell yer?"
 "Yes."
 "Then I'd tell on those tarms mighty quick, if I know'd."
 "Do you know any one who can tell?"
 "I does not."
 "For money could you not guess?"
 "I could do considerable guessing for money, but I couldn't tell what I don't know."
 "I believe he is honest in this, madam," said Don.
 "Do as you deem best then, sir," was the reply.
 "You wish him set free?"
 "I do."
 "My man, if I release you, will you look after the body of your comrade?"
 "I will, sir."
 "You promise this?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "One moment," and Don Chetwynd approached the dead body, bent over it, and after a short search drew out a piece of paper, upon which a map was drawn, and a few lines written.
 "What is this?"
 "Our instructions."
 "It appears to be a map of these very woods, and here is a cabin, with the words:
 "Take her here and wait until carriage comes after dark."
 "That's what we was to do."
 "And a carriage was to come there for this lady?"
 "Yes, and us."
 "And then?"
 "That's all I knows."
 "All right, I will keep this and you can go, but see to it that you care for your comrade's body."
 "I'll do it, sir."
 "To whom do these horses belong?" asked Don, as Pedro advanced leading the two animals, and which were by no means bad specimens of horse-flesh.
 "We hired them at the St. Charles stables, sir."
 "All right, they shall be sent there."
 "Now help the negro to take the saddles from those dead animals and place them on these."
 The man obeyed with alacrity, and Don Chetwynd aided the woman to mount when the horse was ready for her.
 "Do you not return to the city, sir?" she asked, as he raised his hat in farewell.
 "Not just yet, madam."
 "I hope I may again meet you, sir, and under circumstances when I can prove my appreciation of all that you have done for me, and I beg you will not speak of this adventure of mine."
 "I shall respect your wishes, lady."
 "Adieu, monsieur," and she spoke the words with deep feeling, wheeled her horse and rode rapidly away, followed by her groom, and leaving Don Chetwynd standing by his horse and gazing after her with an interest he could not understand.

CHAPTER XXV.

FOILED.

WHEN the Vailed Lady had disappeared from view among the pines, Don Chetwynd turned to

the man whom he had set free at her urgent request.

That worthy was very coolly rifling the pockets of his dead comrade of everything of value, and at the same time mentally congratulating himself that he had not been the one to come under the aim of the young planter.

"My man!"

"Sir, to you."

"There is a fisherman's cabin half a mile yonder, on the shore, so you go there and borrow from him his spade and shovel, with which to dig a grave, while I wait here by your comrade's body."

The man started off and Don Chetwynd paced to and fro, making short turns, as had been his wont on the quarter-deck of his ship.

Soon he saw the man returning, and with him was the fisherman, the latter evidently much excited.

"I told the old man, sir, that there was a man kilt here, as had attacked a lady, and—"

"But was she hurt, sir, was she hurt?" cried Jean, for he it was.

"No, she was not injured."

"Thank God!" ejaculated Jean, with a fervent manner that surprised Don, who asked:

"Do you know the lady, monsieur?"

"Know her! God knows I know her, and—"

He broke off suddenly, and, from having spoken in perfect French, dropped into the *patois* of the lower classes of Creoles.

"Who is she?"

"Oh, monsieur, I do not know."

"You just said that you did know her."

"Monsieur, I have seen the lady riding through these woods, and she has stopped at my humble cabin and had a draught of water, for which she paid liberally, for I am but a poor fisherman, monsieur, an humble toiler."

"That is all I know, monsieur."

Don Chetwynd was a good reader of human nature, and he saw that the old man was telling him a falsehood, but he said quietly:

"Well, the lady was not harmed, though her horse and her groom's were shot."

"The footpad there was killed, and I asked this man to go to your cabin and get a spade to dig a grave with."

"But, monsieur, will not the law officers come here and make me trouble?" gasped Jean.

"Not unless you send for them, for I shall not speak of the affair."

"Good, monsieur! but your man here?"

"I'll be as dumb as a oyster, old man," was the ready reply of the man, who was shouldering the body of his comrade to bear it some distance from the path.

The others followed, Jean bearing the spade and shovel and Don leading his horse.

A spot was soon found, and in the sandy soil a grave was quickly dug, the body deposited in it, and pine straw scattered over it to wholly conceal it from any one who might pass through the woods.

"I'll be on the safe side, monsieur, and drag the bodies of those animals to the bayou tonight with my horse, and they'll go out with the midnight tide, while I can cut some saplin's down and drag them home to cover up the tracks, for, monsieur, law officers are so curious, and they might come scenting round, and they'd suspect me, I know they would."

"Your own consciousness of innocence should keep you from fearing officers of the law, old man," said Don, feeling conscious himself that the old man's record might not bear investigation.

As Jean then departed Don said to the man at his side, and who seemed to be awaiting permission to go:

"Here, my man, put this gold in your pocket, and when you can refresh your memory as to who was at the bottom of this kidnapping scheme write to my address and I will treble the sum for information you may give."

"You sealed the lips that could tell, sir; but I thanks you."

"It will be worth your while to try and find out, as you know there will be money in it for you."

"Thank you, sir, I'll try," was the answer.

And springing into the saddle Don Chetwynd rode away.

Glancing at the map which he had taken from the body of the dead man, he sought the cabin indicated thereon.

It was several miles from where the attack had occurred, and it was dark when he reached there.

The cabin, however, he found deserted, but, utterly fearless, he hitched his horse in the rear and calmly waited, feeling sure that the carriage would arrive.

He had not long to wait, for he heard wheels coming along the sandy road, and soon a vehicle halted at the door.

"Ho, my man, whom have you come for?" and Don Chetwynd stepped out and confronted the driver.

It was bright moonlight, and he saw a negro on the box and that the vehicle was an ordinary city hack.

"I come for a ledgy, massa, as I was told would be here wid some gemmans."

"Who sent you?"

"A gemman come to my stand, sah, and axed me if I know'd whar this cabin was, and I told him 'yas, sah,' so he give me ten dollars and told me to come here, sah, and fetch the folkses as was waiting for me."

"Where did he tell you to take them?"

"He said as how the gemmans wid the lady would tell me, sah."

"I am foiled here," muttered Don, while aloud he said:

"Well, my man, you can go back to town, for the parties are not here; but if you ever see the gentleman again, who sent you here, follow him, find out who he is and where he lives, and go to Judge Thatcher, whom you know."

"Yas, sah, I knows him."

"Well, go to the judge and tell him who the gentleman is, and you shall be well paid; but remember, you must not let the party know you are watching him."

"Oh, no, sah; I kin keep dark as any nigger, sah."

"All right, my man, and here is a gold-piece for your disappointment in not getting your load," and mounting his horse Don Chetwynd rode rapidly back to the city, his thoughts busy with all he had passed through during his afternoon's ride, while he in vain tried to solve the mystery of the Vailed Horsewoman.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FICKLE FORTUNE.

WHEN Don Chetwynd returned to the St. Charles stables he found that the Vailed Lady had sent the two horses around after her arrival at home, and his inquiries there failed to discover any one who knew the men who hired the animals.

Arriving at the hotel, he found Judge Thatcher still at work, yet becoming most anxious about his long delay.

Having pledged the strange woman, whom he had so well served, that he would not speak of the affair, he simply told the judge that he had extended his ride far longer than he had anticipated, and then said:

"Come, judge, it is time we were having some supper, and then I wish you to go around with me to the Golden Chance."

"I will go with you, Don, with pleasure, as soon as I send word home not to expect me until late; but I hope you do not intend to play," the judge said, anxiously.

"Yes, judge, I do."

"But, my dear boy—"

"Now I know what you would say, judge, and remind me what a curse gambling was to my poor father; but the truth is I have a purpose in my gambling, and I will leave it off as soon as the end is attained."

"Come, let us be off."

The two men had supper together, and afterward wended their way to the Golden Chance Salon.

It was in full blast, and there were many more present than usual.

Glancing over the crowd Don Chetwynd did not see either Duke Despard or Fred Thurston present, and so remarked to Judge Thatcher, telling him he had passed them on the shell road that afternoon.

Going to the *roulette* table Don made a few plays and without a loss.

Then he tried *faro* with a like result, and going from table to table still remained winner at everything he undertook.

As his luck was phenomenal many watched him with the deepest interest, and when he walked toward the Queen of Fortune's table, accompanied by the judge, he found a large crowd there.

His eyes then fell upon Duke Despard, and, by a strange coincidence the gambler had entered the *salon* and followed the same line of playing which Don Chetwynd had done.

He had gone, a gentleman said, from table to table, risking a thousand dollars at each one, and winning, until he at last reached the Queen's presence.

She greeted him with a smile, which did not change when the gambler said coolly:

"Five thousand on the game, Lady Lulu, and as much more as a bet that I win it."

"I take your bet, sir," was the reply, and then, after a moment she added, as she won:

"And your money too."

Duke Despard did not wince, but immediately played again upon the same terms.

He lost, and at this moment Don Chetwynd and the judge approached.

The Queen bowed to them, and turning to Duke Despard asked:

"Do you play again, sir?"

"Certainly."

"And you lose, sir," she said with a smile.

"I cannot understand your luck, Lady Lulu," said the gambler.

"I was born under a lucky star, sir; will you try it again?"

"I will wait and see what luck awaits that gentleman," and he motioned toward Don Chetwynd, who just then laid a hundred dollars upon the table.

"You have won, sir," said the Queen with a pleasant smile, while a round of applause was

given, as it was the first time Lady Lulu's luck had been broken.

Don showed no emotion at his success, but raised his hat politely at the marked applause given him, and said:

"I play the same card and double the bet, madam."

"It is yours, sir," was the reply, and once more a murmur of satisfaction was heard, for a number were there who never had won a stake against the Lady of Luck.

"I keep the same card, madam, and double my bet," Don remarked with the coolness of an old gambler.

"You make it four hundred dollars, sir?"

"Yes, madam."

"It is yours," came a moment after.

"I repeat as before," said Don Chetwynd, and once more he was a winner.

"I still repeat my bet, and double," Don remarked in the most casual manner.

"And I place ten thousand upon the same card, Lady Lulu," cried Duke Despard, in a voice that all heard.

"I change my card then to this," came coolly from the planter, and he transferred his bet, leaving Duke Despard's upon the one he had vacated.

The gambler bit his lips slightly, at this evident desire on the part of the planter to have nothing to do with him, but allowed his bet to remain, feeling assured that the card that had so steadily won was likely to again do so.

The Queen of Fortune dealt her cards in the same rapid, expert manner as before, and a perfect yell from the crowd followed her words:

"You, sir, win; Mr. Despard loses."

"I will change my card, madam, this time, and double my bet as before," and Don Chetwynd was as cool as ice.

"I play a thousand on each of those ten cards," said Duke Despard, and he placed his money, avoiding the card he had before bet on, and all that Don Chetwynd had chosen.

Then all anxiously awaited the result, for the gambler's chances were ten to one to the planter's.

"You win, sir, Mr. Despard loses," said the Queen of Fortune, adding:

"Do you play again, sir?"

"Yes, and change my card and double my bet as before."

"And you, Mr. Despard?" and the Queen of Fortune smiled upon him most sweetly.

"I place a thousand upon every card on the table, except the one held by Mr. Chetwynd's bet," was the bold response, and a murmur of admiration at his pluck greeted his words.

Duke Despard was perfectly cool, and glancing at Don Chetwynd under his brows, he saw that the young planter was now risking all he had won upon a single card, and yet was as utterly unmoved as though he held no interest in the game.

The Queen also showed no manner of excitement, and her hands were as firm as a rock as she dealt the cards.

"Three better sets of nerves I never saw," whispered a looker-on.

"They are game," was the answer.

"Which one will break first?" was a question asked.

"The planter is winning the gambler's money, though he plays against the bank, and the Queen is not much of a loser, if any," said one gentleman, who had closely watched the game and observed that Don Chetwynd about won Duke Despard's losses, while the Lady of Luck simply had to transfer the money, the bank not being the loser.

"All ready?" coolly asked Lady Lulu.

"Yes, madam," responded Don.

"Go ahead, Lady Lulu, and beat me if you can this time," almost rudely said Duke Despard.

A silence like death followed, and then came in an even tone:

"You are beaten, Mr. Despard, and this gentleman's single card wins."

"You have captured my luck, Lady Lulu; but I hope for revenge another time," and Duke Despard laughed lightly, with no show of annoyance.

"And you seem to have broken my luck, sir, for your run has been marvelous," said Lady Lulu to Don Chetwynd.

"Fortune is fickle, madam," was the young planter's response.

"Do you play again, sir?"

"Not to-night, thank you."

"Permit me to give you a check for your winnings, sir."

"Do me the favor to send it to the Committee on Charity; to be distributed among the poor of the city," was the quiet reply, and a perfect storm of applause greeted the words, as Don Chetwynd turned on his heel and walked away with Judge Thatcher, who said eagerly:

"Don, my boy, your luck was marvelous, and that last act of yours was a noble one, and just like you; but will that woman do as you requested, think you?"

"I feel that she will, judge, or I am no reader of human nature," was the earnest response.

"Well, well, you downed Despard grandly,

and it is his money, what you won from him, for he lost it to the bank, that goes to charity."

"Why, he'll be green with hatred of you."

Don Chetwynd laughed as though he rather enjoyed winning the undying hatred of Duke Despard, the Ruby King.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A "TOUGH" VISITOR.

THAT Duke Despard was foiled in his effort to kidnap the mysterious Vailed Horsewoman, the reader has already seen, and he fretted at having to wait at Jackson Square, the place of rendezvous for so long a while.

He paced to and fro impatiently, glanced at his watch repeatedly, and at last felt sure that the plot had miscarried.

As it was late he anathematized Thurston, his hirelings, and all else, and betook himself to the Golden Chance.

He played at the first table he came to, and so wandered about, holding his luck until, as has been seen, he faced the Queen of Fortune, whom he saw serenely seated at her table, and at once felt that Fred Thurston was all wrong about her being the Vailed Lady.

"He has made a botch of it; but I will know to-night just what he has done," he muttered.

After losing heavily, and seeing Don Chetwynd, to his amazement and chagrin, break the luck of the Queen of Fortune and pocket his money, to then give it away in charity, he was still more surprised, and said to himself:

"Why, he has given away a small fortune, when he hardly has a dollar, I suppose, over his old rookery and the few negroes there."

"But he plays with wonderful nerve, I admit, and is a dangerous adversary."

"Now to find out what is the cause of Thurston's failure."

Going to his rooms, Ogre handed him a letter. It read:

"As I saw the Spanish Lady and her escort ride back to the city this afternoon, mounted upon the very horses my men had ridden, I followed her and she went directly home."

"Soon after a negro came out with the horses without saddles or bridles, and carried them to their stable."

"I followed him and found that he paid for the saddles and bridles, and the hire, most liberally, saying that the horses had been given to him to return."

"I called to him and asked him where he lived, and his reply was that he was the slave of a Spanish señora."

"I tried to bribe him to tell me more, but, though I offered him hundreds I could glean no information from him regarding his mistress, or why she had returned from her ride on those horses."

"I then rode rapidly out to find my men, going along the woodland path where they were to lie in ambush for her."

"I found there no trace of them, but the dead horses of the Spanish lady and her groom, both shot through the head."

"I saw evidences of a struggle, blood-marks upon the pine straw, but could find no trace of my men, so what does it mean?"

"I will see you in the morning and hope to have some information for you."

"Trust you will go to the Golden Chance and see if the Lady Lulu is in her accustomed place to-night."

There was no signature, but Duke Despard knew well who it was from, and the contents set him pondering.

When Ogre came in with his midnight supper, he said:

"There was a man here to see you twice, master, and he has come again."

"Who is he?"

"Do not know, master."

"Show him in."

A moment after the visitor entered, a man with a rough, bearded face and well-knit form.

"Well, sir, this is a late hour for a call?"

"It is, sir, but I hoped to find Mr. Thurston here."

"He is not here."

"You will do as well, sir, for I know he is acting for you."

"Ah! you are one of the men I met on horseback this afternoon, going out toward the lake?"

"I am."

"Well?"

"I'm the only one left."

"What?"

"I means it, mister, t'other one is cloud-climbin' now."

"Dead?"

"And buried."

"Come, tell me what has happened," impatiently said Duke Despard.

"What I knows comes high, but I suppose you must have it."

"I will pay you well, if that is what you mean."

"It's worth a thousand."

"Nonsense; I will give you a hundred dollars."

"I knows one as will pay liberal to know who sent us to kidnap the lady."

"Ah! who is he?"

"One thousand, no more, no less."

"I'll give it to you."

"Seeing is believing, mister."

With an oath Duke Despard took out the sum

and threw it toward the man who, with provoking coolness, calmly counted it.

"Now, what do you know?"

"We ambushed for the lady in the woods and shot their horses as they come along."

"Bunco, my pal, tackled the lady, and I jumped onto the nigger, and it were not long afore I found I had made a big mistake, for he was a hard one to handle, so I concluded to put lead into him."

"I shot once and wounded his arm, and that made him only the madder, so I had to drop the weapon to keep him from getting it and killing me."

"Things were looking squally for yours truly, when I heard a loud voice, then two shots, and Bunco went under, kilt by a gentleman who come upon the scene unexpected."

"It took him the photograph of a second to knock me out, and telling the nigger to shoot me if I winked, he went back to look after the lady."

"They had some small talk together, and then he told me he would set me free if I would bury my pal and keep silent about the affair, after telling him all I knew."

"I told him Bunco was my boss, and I knew nothing, and I guesses he believed me; but he said if I did refresh my memory and get at the bottom facts, he had money to pay me for the knowledge."

"Well, Mister Ruby King, the lady and nigger rode off on our horses, and the gent sent me to a cabin to git a spade to bury Bunco with, and an old man, Jean, the fisherman, they calls him, come back with me."

"We buried Bunco, and Jean was to drag the dead horses off to-night and put 'em in the bayou, and that covers up the little matter."

"And did this fisherman know about the attack?"

"Yes, mister, for it was to visit him and his wife she goes into the pines."

"Ah! and he was to keep it secret?"

"He seemed anxious to do so."

"And did you see the lady's face?"

"Not once."

"Who was this gentleman?"

"You knows him."

"His name?"

"He's a man clean through, a gentleman, and his name is Mister Chetwynd."

"Don Chetwynd! I might have known it."

"If that woman is whom Thurston suspects, that accounts for her allowing him to win to-night and break her luck."

"Aha! this is a wheel within a wheel, and I shall have my hands full looking further into the mystery."

Duke Despard had spoken to himself, and now turning to the man he asked:

"What is your name?"

"The boys call me Tough, mister, and I guess that name is about as good as any other, seeing as how I never was christened, that I knows of."

"I guess it is suitable, from your general appearance, Mister Tough; but have you seen Mr. Thurston?"

"No, sir; but I looked for him, and not finding him came to see you."

"Well, Tough, I may have work for you, so drop in every evening after dark, and see if Ogre has any word for you, as I will tell him to let you know when I need you."

"Thank you, sir," and Tough took his leave, having given Duke Despard much food for thought.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

THE business which had taken Don Chetwynd to the city having been satisfactorily arranged, the morning after his breaking the luck of the Queen of Fortune, he decided to take the Natchez that afternoon for home, as he was anxious to be once more in the sunshine of Fidèle Faxon's sweet smile.

He drove up to see Ruth Ruggles on his departure, and renewed his request to her that she should look upon him as a brother, and to seek his advice or aid as though he was, adding:

"If you need me at any time write and I will come, while, if you wish any information regarding your business affairs seek it of Judge Thatcher."

"You have been so good to me," was the low reply, and tears came into her beautiful eyes, while she said impulsively:

"Kiss me good-by!"

His face flushed, but he bent over and kissed the red lips and hastily departed, the words of Judge Thatcher echoing in his heart:

"Ruth Ruggles loves you, Don, and if you can return her love she will make you a noble wife."

Judge Thatcher drove down to the steamer with the young planter, and bade him farewell, promising to keep him posted of everything that occurred of interest to him, and the magnificent steamer pulled out into the stream to burst for the lead of the half-dozen other boats that had started before her.

Standing alone upon the forward guard of the steamer, Don Chetwynd was watching the city and its environs, passing like a panorama

before him, as the Natchez sped swiftly along, when a cry of alarm was raised by a passenger, and all eyes were turned upon a small skiff off the starboard bow, rocking wildly upon the waves of the steamers that had just passed.

The skiff held but a single occupant, and that one a young girl, who seemed to be in vain trying to steady her boat with the oars.

Just as the bow of the Natchez was abreast with the skiff, which was some sixty feet distant, a curling wave rushing shoreward tossed it over, and the maiden was hurled into the waters.

Don Chetwynd seemed to have anticipated just such a catastrophe, for he had hastily thrown aside his coat, vest and shoes, and as the skiff went over he plunged into the river, his gallant act bringing a loud cheer from the deckhands and passengers.

They saw him rise many feet away, and with rapid strokes swim toward the drowning girl.

Captain Tom Leathers, ever gallant, had already slackened speed to prevent the wash of the Natchez from imperiling the girl, and seeing that she was in the water, ordered a boat lowered quickly to go to her aid and that of her gallant rescuer.

Torn from the skiff by the rough waters, the girl was fast sinking, when Don called out:

"Do not be alarmed, for I will save you."

In the very nick of time he grasped her, for she was sinking for the last time as he reached for her hand.

"You are all right now; bear your weight on me—there! Now we will soon reach the shore."

His confident manner calmed her fears, and she yielded herself to his guidance, and the shore being much nearer than the steamer, which had shot ahead ere the boat could be lowered, he swam with his fair burden swiftly toward it.

The boat came rapidly on, but he reached the bank, and an old negress grasped the girl as he did so, and held her in her arms, while she cried:

"Lordy, missy! you is saved! you is saved!"

"Thank de Lord and dis younggemman!"

The girl turned toward her preserver, and was about to speak, when he said quickly:

"I trust you will feel no ill-effects from your ducking, miss—good-by!"

With a spring he was back in the river, swimming rapidly toward the coming boat, unhearing, or if hearing, unheeding the words of gratitude sent after him by the one he had rescued.

"Come, boys, give me a hand and pull me in, for we must not detain the steamer," he said, cheerily, as the boat drew near, and quickly the crew pulled back toward the steamer, while the rescued maiden and the old negress stood on the shore gazing after them.

A perfect ovation greeted Don as he stepped on board, while Captain Leathers, after giving orders to the pilot to "Go ahead with full speed," hurried him to the bar for a very much-needed glass of "Something to keep you from catching cold, Mr. Chetwynd, for the water is very chilly."

Half an hour after Don Chetwynd, arrayed in dry clothing, found himself a hero, for it took a brave man to make the leap he had, and a bold, strong swimmer to accomplish what he had done.

But a sailor, as he had been, the young planter made light of it, though in his heart he felt happy that he had saved a human life, and could tell Fidèle Faxon what he had done.

"It will perhaps compensate in Fidèle's eyes for my part in Ruggles's fatal duel," he said to himself, as he pondered over all that had happened.

Who the young girl was no one seemed to know, not even Captain Leathers, who said that he had often seen her out in her skiff before and feared some accident would befall her, as she was very reckless in riding the waves of the passing steamers.

"She looked to be very pretty," said a passenger.

"She was certainly very beautiful," Don Chetwynd responded.

"She entered a pretty cottage on the riverbank, for I watched her," another said.

"Did you tell her your name, Chetwynd, and ask hers?" Captain Leathers asked, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, no; I was too glad to get away and avoid her thanks, so I departed the moment she was safe."

"I shall have her on board the moment I get back, asking who you are, your age, if you are married, and all about you; so to save myself from being questioned to death, I shall cut that very complimentary notice of you out of the *Picayune* and simply hand it to her," laughed the captain, adding a moment after with great earnestness:

"Chetwynd, you did a noble deed, and one you can remember with pride to your dying day."

And so on up the river sped the Natchez, dropping, one by one, the fleet steamers that had preceded her, until she was the gallant leader, at was her wont, and in due time Don Chet-

wynd landed at his plantation home, where Kit met him with a hearty welcome.

Another passenger had come ashore at the Idlerest landing, and observing him, Don was about to speak and ask him what plantation he sought, when the party in question came quickly forward, grasping a huge sachel in one hand and a cane and umbrella in the other.

"Mine fri'nt, vill you vas tells me v're vas t'e blantations of Schudge Jeremiah Joslyns?"

"It is two miles from here, near the village, and I will send you over there, if you will come by the house with me," was the reply.

"I vill do that mit bleasures, mine fri'nt."

"From my state-rooms door I vas see you joomp overboard and pulls von ladys out of t'e vater; put you don't see me, for I vas haf plenty of moneys here mit me, so stay in my state-rooms to vatch him all t'e time."

"I advise you not to tell any one else, my friend, that you have a large amount of money with you; but Kit will drive you over to Judge Joslyn's."

"What vas you sharge me, mine fri'nt?"

"We make no charge in this country, sir, for little acts of kindness to each other."

"Ah! you vas lose a tollar, for I vas pay that."

"Keep your money, sir, for I can afford to lose it."

"Come, Kit, get a rig ready and drive this gentleman over to Judge Joslyn's."

Soon after Kit drove off with the Jew, who held in his lap his sachel, upon which was the name in large letters:

"JACOB JUDAH,

"MONEY-LENDER,

"NEW ORLEANS."

It was the Jew friend of Judge Joslyn, come in answer to the latter's letter regarding the loan for Colonel Faxon.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE JEW AND THE JUDGE.

Kit, the faithful valet of Don Chetwynd, was as shrewd as he was brave.

He had learned to read and write from his master, the doctor, and in fact had been taught much by him that gave him advanced ideas upon many things.

With excellent perceptive faculties, great intelligence, and sterling qualities, he was a most valuable friend as well as servant, and so Doctor Chetwynd had found him, while Don had found him invaluable, he being to the latter, as he had to his father, a comrade as well as slave.

When Kit's glance fell on Mr. Jacob Judah at the Landing, he had enjoyed hearing him talk, for the sense of the ridiculous is strongly marked in the negro character, while he set him down in his own mind as a rascal, having a hazy recollection that his old master had once had dealings of a monetary kind with just such a personage.

"Vell, mine fri'nt, who vas t'e names of your master?" asked Mr. Judah, as they drove away from the mansion.

"Mister Donald Chetwynd is his name, sir."

"Ah! I vas know t'e names of Chetwynds—his fader vas kilt himself, don't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knows dat; he vas gambles away his monish, yes?"

"I lend him monish somedimes mineselfs."

"Vas his sons play gambles?"

"No, sir."

"That vas too pad, for me, for maype he vants monish somedimes, and I let him haf it at twenty-five per cent., cheap it vas; but I vants goot security."

"I vas coom here now to lend some monish to a gentilmans, that Schudge Joslyns writes me all about."

"Do you knows him, nigger mans?"

"Who is he, master?"

"Colonels Faxon."

"Yes, sir."

"He vas very rich, don't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Haf many nigger mans and vomans?"

"Yes, sir; this is his plantation adjoining my master's," and Kit pointed out the handsome home of Colonel Faxon, as seen from the highway.

"Ah, it vas p'utifuls; vell, he ask t'e schudge for monish, t'e schudge write me, and I haf got it; put don't say noddings about it, nigger mans."

"Oh, no, sir."

In his quiet way Kit soon learned just what brought the Jew to the neighborhood, and the fact that Colonel Faxon had gotten a loan through Judge Joslyn convinced him that the planter did not wish the fact known.

By the time they drove up to the door of Barriester Hall Kit had gleaned considerable information.

The judge was smoking his pipe upon the piazza and recognizing the Jew, sprung to his feet, his red face growing redder with delight.

"Judah, my old friend, how are you?"

"Thrice welcome, thou son of Israel, to Barriester Hall; but would that I had known you

were coming on the Natchez," which just passed up the river, and I would have driven over to meet you, for, as a gentleman of the old school, Jacob, I can never neglect a friend."

"T'e nigger mans prings me over, sehudge dear, and I vas vant to make him a bresent."

"Here vas ten cents, mine fri'nt."

"Oh, no, sir, I thank you," said Kit, laughing inwardly at the Jew, and he sprung out to attend to something about the harness.

"Did you come fixed, Jacob?"

"What vas fixed, shudge?"

"With t'e money."

"Yes, I haf twenty t'ousand tollars mit me."

"Good! we will go over to Faxon's to-morrow, and my word for it, we make a big thing out of this, yes, thousands for each of us; Judah, just think of that, thousands for each."

"He's a gold-fish, Jacob, and you and I have got the net; so we'll draw up papers to-night that will be just what he need—Ah, boy, can any of my slaves help you there?"

"No, sir, thank you master, I've got it fixed," said Kit, going and getting into the buggy.

"My compliments to your master, Kit, and tell him I shall soon call and pay my respects."

"You better not," thought Kit, but he said:

"Yes, master, I'll tell him, and he'll be glad to see you, for he speaks of you often."

With this Kit drove off, not caring to tell the judge just how his master had spoken of him, as it might hasten his departure.

"Come, Jacob, let me take you to your room to wash and brush up a little, and then we will have a drink together."

"Schudge, dear, I don't vas vant to vash and prush up a leetle, for I vas all right, so take t'e trink now."

"Yes, Jacob, yes; sit right there in that easy chair while I see that my servants get the decanters and glasses."

"You will enjoy looking at the scenery, for, as you see, I have a fine place here, Jacob, a fine place."

"It vas a fine place somedimes long ago, sehudge, vas, but it don't vas now; it vas too much t'e drowns."

"Amen, vell, Jacob, I have not attended to fixing up things of late, that is true; but it will be all right when I get our little *bonus* from Colonel Faxon."

"It takes a great many *ponus*, sehudge, dear, to fix up this place."

"And we will get plenty, Jacob."

"He vants twenty t'ousand tollars, you writes me?"

"Yes."

"He gives good security?"

"The best."

"I vants twenty-five per cent. interest, which vas five t'ousand tollars."

"Yes."

"I gif you five per cent., sehudge, of t'e five t'ousands."

"Jacob, I'm no fool, but a gentleman of the old school, and as such I am wide awake."

"I want one thousand dollars from you, of your five, payable when the matter is settled."

"Oh, sehudge! you vas ruin me."

"No, I mean business clean through, and I want my thousand dollars, for you get four thousand, which is just three thousand more than any one would charge."

"Vell, sehudge, I gif you t'e t'ousand tollars."

"There, Jacob, you are sensible."

"But you pays my passage mit t'e poat up and back."

"No, Jacob, I pay nothing; I never did, I never will, and those who know me as a gentleman of the old school never expect it of me."

"Vas dat so?"

"Yes; and, Jacob!"

"Vell, sehudge?"

"I have an idea."

"Gif him to me, sehudge."

"We can draw up two papers for Faxon to sign, one giving as security his plantation, negroes, stock and all, while the other gives only the land and few negrees he gave me a list of as the security."

"Vell, sehudge?"

"We will read him the latter, and then change the papers, giving him the wrong one, with all as security, to sign."

"He won't suspect trickery, he will sign it, and then we must see that he does not get the money to pay back, and between us we will get a couple of hundred thousand dollars' property for twenty thousand in cash."

"Holy Moses an' t'e angels! Sehudge, you haf t'e great pig head," cried the delighted Jew.

Judge Joslyn, looked pleased at the compliment, swelled up in importance until he burst a button off his coat, while he said patronizingly:

"Yes, Mr. Judah, I was always a deep thinker, a man of great brain."

"I gif you twenty t'ousand tollars, sehudge, if it comes out all rights."

"Jacob, this little matter is no percentage game, no commission business, it is a square divvy between us."

"But, schudge, I vas put up my dwenty t'ousant tollars, and you vas do noddings."

The judge fairly gasped for breath at the thought of his being a mere nothing in comparison with twenty thousand dollars.

At last he broke out with:

"Lord pity the ignorance of that poor Jew!"

"Why, Jacob Judah, what is your money to my greatbrain?"

"Your money and my brains do the work, and we go shares, or it's no deal."

"I have been cramped for funds of late, and I have studied out this way to help us both out, so if you do not care to make a clean hundred thousand on an investment of twenty thousand, just say the word and I'll raise the money elsewhere."

"I was your man, schudge," eagerly said the Jew.

"It's a bargain then, Jacob, so now we'll take a drink."

And they took several, until they both went to bed felling quite mellow.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE REFUSAL.

So anxious was Don Chetwynd to see Fidèle Faxon, and explain to her why he had gone to the city without once more visiting her, that he ordered his horse saddled, determined to ride over to The Retreat that afternoon.

He had told Fidèle that he had a secret to tell her, and he was anxious that she should know it, for his heart burned to make known to her something he had kept hidden within it for a long time.

Never in his life before did he make so careful a toilet, dressing himself in a new riding-suit, of white corduroy pantaloons, a velvet sack-coat and light slouch hat.

He looked very handsome as he mounted his horse, causing the old negro "Mammy" that had nursed him in his infancy to call out:

"Marse Don, you is certain a werry han'some gemman, sah."

"Thank you, Mam' Phillis, I hope the one I am going to see will think as much of me as you do."

"She can't help it, Mars' Don, she can't help it, sah."

Don rode off in a good humor, and dashing up the gravel drive of The Retreat threw his rein to old Uncle Zeke, who said:

"Glad you are back, Mars' Don, and Missy Fidèle will be pow'ful glad to see you, sah."

Just then the door opening upon the piazza unclosed and Fidèle came forth.

She was dressed in pure white, wore a pretty sun-hat trimmed with ribbons and looked most bewitching, though a little pale.

She had a book in her hand, and was on her way to her favorite retreat, a pretty rustic arbor on the river-bank, where she was wont to sit and read, write letters, paint or embroider, as the humor suited her.

She flushed crimson at sight of Don, not hearing him gallop up to the door, and then her face turned pale, and her eyes did not meet his as she extended her hand.

"I rode over to see you, Miss Fidèle, having returned from New Orleans to-day."

"May I accompany you to the arbor, for I see that your destination was thither?"

"I am glad to see you back, Mr. Chetwynd," she said with an effort, and then added slowly:

"Yes, let us go to the arbor if you prefer it."

They walked along together, both silent, for Fidèle Faxon's heart told her why he had come, while he observing her manner and judging her by his own feelings, felt that she knew all that he had to say to her and thus was constrained.

"Tell me of your hurried departure for the city," she said, seating herself in a rustic chair and motioning him to a seat upon a settee, where he had hoped she would sit beside him.

"Judge Thatcher, my lawyer, came up to see me, Miss Fidèle, and we were so busy that I did not have time to fetch him over to see your father, while some papers we needed were left behind in the city by him, and I decided to go there at once, and did, sending you but a note of farewell."

"It was thoughtful of you; but we have had the papers noticing your arrival there," she said, softly.

"Then you are aware of what happened upon the steamer?" he quickly asked.

"Yes, as the papers tell the story."

"The accounts were, in the main, correct, for I befriended poor Loyd Ruggles against that card-sharp, Duke Despard, than whom no greater scamp lives."

He spoke sternly, and she winced under his words, but said:

"It must have been a bitter blow to his sister to have her brother brought home dead."

"It was, indeed, and never in my life did I have a more painful duty to perform than to break the news to her."

"Loyd left me, as it were, his sister's guardian, for she is not yet of age, and I did all in my power to console her in her deep grief."

"She is a lovely girl, and I wish that she would come and visit me for a month, to get away from herself and her sorrows, as it were."

"Will you, as her guardian, give your permission if I write and ask her to come?" asked Fidèle, with a smile.

"Gladly, and it is so thoughtful and kind of you, but just like you, Fidèle."

"Then I shall write to-night," she said, quickly, and seeing that he was going to speak, she asked:

"Did not Mr. Despard show deep remorse at his act?"

"No, for it is not his nature to feel remorse, or to show it if he does."

"He was out on horseback the day of the funeral, and sat by the cemetery gate, as the funeral cortege passed in, his hat off with the semblance of respect, and bowed head feigning grief."

"Could he do this?" she asked, in a tone of unfeigned horror.

"He did, for Judge Thatcher saw him, though I did not."

"On the boat he was at breakfast the next morning after the duel, and wore that same quiet smile he habitually has on his face."

"He is a remarkable man, but, ah! what a wicked one."

"He is a devil!" said Don, almost fiercely, little dreaming that he was speaking to a wife of her husband.

Fidèle bowed her head and her bosom heaved convulsively.

Mistaking the cause of her emotion, Don Chetwynd stepped to her side and said in his low, earnest voice:

"Fidèle, forget that man and his evil deeds, for the thought of them unnerves you, and some day there will come a reckoning for him which will free the earth of such a viper."

"No! no! no! it must not be, for you—but I believe the thought of poor Loyd Ruggles has unnerved me, so let us talk upon pleasanter topics."

She had almost lost self-control at his words, fearing that he meant that the reckoning of Duke Despard would be with him; but she checked her words quickly, and, with an effort gained perfect control over herself.

"Fidèle, when we met last I told you I had a secret for you, and I now will tell it you."

She turned very pale, seemed uneasy, and bit her lips but remained silent, for she felt that the ordeal was at hand, and she could not put it off.

He took her hand, and she let it lie listlessly within his grasp, while he went on in the same earnest tones:

"It is a secret that I never told to other ears, sailor though I have been and a rover about the world."

"I have always held love too sacred to breathe it without a full knowledge of one's own heart, and so, though often lured by bright eyes, by moonlit scenes, by surroundings that incite a man to pour his affection into willing ears, I have never done so, because always before me would rise an image, the image of a fair young girl whose life I once saved, and who, from that moment seemed to become a part of my inmost being."

"Need I tell you the secret now, Fidèle, or have you known it all these years, that you have been the star that guided my destiny, incited my ambition, inspired me to keep my heart, my life pure for your sake?"

"Have you guessed this, Fidèle, or have you not wished it so?"

"Don, oh, Don! pity me," she moaned.

He was surprised, pained, for he could not understand her.

Her face fairly writhed with suffering most intense, and he could but see that she was moved by some deep emotion.

"Fidèle, speak to me, for what does it mean?" he pleaded, anxiously.

She bowed her head until it touched his shoulder, and sobs shook her frame.

He put forth his arm to draw her toward him, when she suddenly sprang backward and drawing herself up she became instantly calm.

Cold and firm fell the words from her lips:

"Don Chetwynd, you have asked for my love and you have told me that you loved me."

"I prize that love far more than you can ever know; but I tell you now that I cannot return your affection, I cannot listen to your words of endearment, for, what we are to-day to each other we must so remain."

"Great God, Fidèle! what do your ambiguous words mean?"

"Just what I say, I mean; you and I can be friends, but more it is impossible for us to be."

"I beg you to explain."

"I beg you not to ask me, for I cannot explain."

"There is a mystery in all this."

"It is a mystery which you must not try to solve."

"I will solve it, I will know why you say that you prize my love and yet cast me from you."

"No, no, no! you must not, you must let all remain as it now is."

"Be my friend, Don, be as a brother to me, but do not hope for more, for indeed it cannot be."

He stood now before her as though stunned by her words.

Then he drew himself up, and said, slowly and calmly:

"Miss Faxon, that you would descend to trifling with a man's love, I cannot, will not believe."

"That there is some motive that impels you to act as you do, I am assured."

"Friends we may be, and if you will so regard me still, I shall be happy; but I register a vow to go to the bottom of this damnable mystery that drives me from the woman I love with all the intensity of my nature."

"Now I will bid you good-evening."

The setting sun cast its rays full upon his handsome face, showing how pale and stern it was, and tinged the red-gold hair of Fidèle Faxon as she stood with bowed head before him.

As he half turned away she held forth her hand, and yet did not raise her face to his.

He grasped her hand, bent low over it, pressed a kiss upon the taper fingers, and walked rapidly away.

She sunk down into the chair she had risen from, and buried her face in her hands.

She heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs as he rode swiftly away, and they sounded as dismal to her as clods falling upon a loved one's coffin.

The sun sunk behind the distant hills, the shadows began to grow deeper.

"Twilight cast its sable mantle
O'er the earth,
And pinned it with
A single star."

but still she remained with head bowed down in woe.

Suddenly a hand stole into her own, and a voice said:

"Missy Fidèle, don't feel so sad, for some day you'll be so happy."

It was Trip, her quadroon maid, and, touched by the tender words, Fidèle dropped her head upon the negress's shoulder and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON HIS TRACK.

FRED THURSTON was really alarmed, when he could not find out what had become of his two men, whom he had hired to kidnap the Vailed Lady.

He had several times employed Bunco and Tough, the two kidnappers, upon little affairs of his own, and knew them to be faithful, where they were sure of good pay.

He had a hold upon them, which would send them to prison if he wished to do so, and this he knew would keep them true.

Failing to find them, and discovering the two dead horses he became alarmed.

Finding that the Vailed Lady and her ward returned to her home, mounted upon the horses of the kidnappers, he was at a loss to account for it.

Failing to find his men in the city, he rode out to the woods early the next morning, as soon as it was dawn.

To interview the old fisherman was his intention, and endeavor to find from him, either by threats or bribery, all he could tell about the case.

From this source, however, he gleaned no information, and so sought Duke Despard in his rooms.

The Ruby King heard all he had to tell, without making known that Tough had been to see him, and then telling him the kidnapper's story, they compared notes.

"What does it mean, Despard?" asked Thurston.

"That my friend, Chetwynd, has stepped in between us and our little game."

"He killed the man Bunco, then?"

"Yes."

"And set Tough free?"

"He did."

"Now, Despard, I have an idea."

"Well?"

"Can we not have Don Chetwynd arrested and held for murder?"

"Who would arrest him?"

"Send secret information that a man was killed in the pines, where to find his grave, and that Chetwynd is the murderer."

"The woman would appear to tell the facts, and he would be set free."

"You think she would?"

"I know it, if she is Lady Lulu."

"Why?"

"Well, she allowed him to win thousands last night at her table, just because he saved her, if the Spanish Vailed Woman is really the Queen of Fortune."

"You mean that he broke her luck?"

"I do."

"Well, I do not understand it."

"Nor I, unless she was captivated by the fellow's splendid looks and what he had done for her."

"Then you begin to believe that the Vailed Woman is the Lady Lulu?"

"That winning of Don Chetwynd against

her made me think so, after I had heard Tough's story."

"Then arresting Don Chetwynd for murder would not do?"

"It is not to be thought of."

"We could, anyhow, find out if I am right in my surmise that the Spanish woman and Lady Lulu are one and the same."

"We must find out some other way."

"As how, for instance?"

"Well, I intend to wait until she rides out again and join her, and I will in some way discover just who she is."

"She goes out to-morrow afternoon, for that much I know through my paid spy."

"I shall be on hand, Fred, and I wish the same game played over again."

"To kidnap her?"

"Yes."

"Can she be caught a second time?"

"Yes, if your men have their wits about them."

"Have you a plan?"

"Yes."

"Out with it, Despard, for I am at sea."

"Let your men meet her on the public road, if she does not enter the pines, and seize her there."

"She will expect no danger, and you must have three men in a carriage."

"They can spring out, one grasp her horse, the other two seize her groom, and she can quickly be mastered, placed in the vehicle and driven off."

"I will meet the vehicle at Jackson League and take her to a place I know of."

"Of course this is the plan if, after joining her, I cannot discover just who and what she is."

"I understand; but I will have to get four men, with the hackman."

"Do so."

"It will cost considerable."

"Cost is not the question in this matter, Thurston; here are some bank-notes, and if you need more command me."

"I thank you, Despard; I will be as economical as I can."

"Ah, yes, I understand your economy, Thurston; but you carry my plot out thoroughly and I will pay you well, don't fear."

"I hate to have you put it on that basis, Despard, so say you will pay expenses."

"Suit yourself in terms and I am suited, but there must be no failure about the work."

"There shall be none," was the decided answer, and soon after Fred Thurston took his leave.

Duke Despard in the mean time devoted himself to idling the day away until late in the afternoon he received an urgent message from Estelle Enders to come to her.

"I do not care to go, and yet I dare not disobey the summons."

"I wished to go to the Golden Chance to-night, and try and hedge on my losses of late; but if I did not go to see Estelle she is just the one to come to the *salon* after me, and then there would be a scene, for that little woman is not to be trifled with."

"She is getting monotonous, and I must get rid of her in some way."

"Well, here goes to see her," and he started for the little cottage, taking a carriage as was his wont.

He was surprised not to have Estelle meet him at the gate, and entering the house found her half-reclining on a lounge.

"Come in, Duke, and sit down here by me, for I have much to tell you," she said, in her pretty, pleading way.

"What, are you ill, Estelle?"

"No, I am all right now; but I nearly lost my life to-day, Duke."

"How?" he asked, eagerly.

"Would you have cared if I had died, Duke?"

"Don't be foolish, Estelle, for you know how deeply I love you."

"I hope so."

"But what accident befell you, Estelle?"

"Well, I was rowing in my little skiff, and went out to ride the waves of the steamers, as I often do; but to-day there were a dozen steamers left about the same time, and running rapidly to get the lead, all of them created the wildest waves in the river I ever saw."

"All had passed, excepting the Natchez, and she was coming swiftly along when a huge wave threw my boat bottom upward."

"Oh, Estelle! how did you escape?"

"There was a gentleman upon the steamer Natchez who saw my danger, and sprung from the deck into the river."

"As I was sinking for the last time, and I was perfectly conscious, he grasped my hand and his words reassured me."

"He swam ashore with me, where Mammy met me, and ere I could thank him, for I was wholly overcome, he sprung back into the river, met the boat sent for him, and was carried back on board of the Natchez, which continued on up the river."

"And who was this daring man that saved the life of my little girl?" asked Duke Despard.

"A man you hate."

"Ah! who in fact?"

"Don Chetwynd!"

Duke Despard sprung to his feet with an oath on his lips, and his face became livid.

Never before had Estelle seen him look as he did, while he hissed forth:

"And he saved your life? he knows who you are?"

"I told you, Duke, that Mr. Chetwynd did not remain an instant, simply said he hoped I would feel no ill-effects from my ducking and alarm, and then left me."

"Did he call you by any name?"

"No, indeed, for he did not know any to call me by."

"And he was on board the Natchez?"

"Yes, fortunately for me, for otherwise I should have been drowned, as no other man would take the chances he did to save one he did not know."

"Oh, he is as brave as a lion, I admit; but I am sorry you owe your life to him."

"But you will call on him and thank him for me and for yourself?"

"Oh, certainly, but he is not in town now."

"Well, when he returns you will?"

"Of course; but he may not be back for several weeks, and I really thought he intended remaining longer in the city this time; but I have some friends to meet me to-night at my rooms, Estelle, and must go, but I will see you to-morrow."

"Why leave me?"

"Well, I have lost heavily of late, and have a chance to catch up to-night."

"You are not going near that dangerous Lady Lulu?"

"No, indeed."

"Well, I suppose I must let you go, but I hate to do so, for, after my experience to-day, you can imagine how I feel."

"Yes, indeed, and you must keep quiet for several days. Good-night!"

He kissed her affectionately and departed. Hardly had the rumble of wheels died away when Estelle sprung to her feet, no longer wearing the look of an invalid.

"Mammy," she called out quickly, and the old negress who met her on the river-bank when she was brought ashore by Don Chetwynd entered the room.

"Did you do as I told you?"

"Yes, Missy 'Stelle."

"The driver took the gold?"

"Yes, missy."

"And said he would return for me?"

"Yes; he come right back, soon as he drop massa whar he going."

"Good! now help me to get ready to go out."

Just as her toilet was completed a carriage rolled up to the gate.

It was the same that Duke Despard had come in to the cottage.

Entering it alone Estelle was driven rapidly away toward the town.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WOMAN'S RUSE.

HAVING made up his mind to again address the Vailed Horsewoman on her next ride, Duke Despard ordered Ogre to have his horse ready at a given time, and placed a man on watch to come and report to him just when the mysterious lady left her home.

He was all ready to go, and lounged about his rooms, impatiently chewing the end of a cigar, rather than taking pleasure in smoking it.

"The man is here, master," said Ogre, coming to the door.

"Show him in," was the abrupt reply.

A moment after a young man appeared at the door.

"Well, sir?"

"The lady has left home, sir."

"How?"

"On horseback, sir."

"Alone?"

"No, sir, a negro groom attends her."

"All right; here," and he tossed the man a gold-piece.

Drawing on his gloves and setting his hat jauntily on his head, he took his whip and descended to the door.

His horse was there, held by the young man who had been his spy on the movements of the Vailed Lady.

Mounting, Duke Despard asked:

"Did you note the way she went?"

"She took the street leading to the lake road, sir."

"All right," and Duke Despard rode off at a slow pace.

As he reached the driveway he could see nothing of her ahead, so quickened his pace, thinking that she must have ridden rapidly to have gotten out of sight.

But seeing nothing of her in the long stretch of road ahead, he muttered:

"She has turned into the cemetery, I guess."

Drawing his horse down to a slow pace, he went leisurely along until he came to the cemetery entrance, when suddenly he beheld the Vailed Lady ride out quickly and turn to the lake.

Her groom was not in sight, but in meeting her the gambler did not think of the negro.

Dashing up to her side, as she rode along at a canter, he raised his hat and said in his pleasant way:

"We meet again, mademoiselle, and I am happy."

"Yes, monsieur, we meet again," was the low response.

"You left me so unceremoniously the other day you grieved me deeply."

"Was it because I told you who I was?"

"Ah, Monsieur Despard, I had no intention to grieve you."

"I feared that you dreaded me because I told you that I had killed young Ruggles, whose body we saw pass into the cemetery as we sat there on our horses together."

"It was a strange sight, monsieur, to see the slayer of a man calmly gaze upon the body of his victim pass to his grave and uncover his head with seeming respect for the misery he had caused."

"Do you doubt my respect, mademoiselle, for you use the word *seeming*?"

"I do not know; I do not understand you, monsieur."

"It is your fault, mademoiselle, not mine, I assure you, for I am willing to let you understand me thoroughly."

"Can I?" she asked, archly.

"Why not, if you think me worth the studying?"

"Have you a conscience, monsieur?"

"I have so."

"Does it never prick you?"

"Ah, mademoiselle, who of us has not often a pricking of conscience?"

"Yet you look as though you had no care in the world."

"It is the schooling I have given myself not to show what I think or feel."

"If I had my hand taken off I could smile during the amputation, if so I wished, mademoiselle."

She glanced quickly at him through her veil, and said:

"Then you have perfect control over yourself, for good or evil?"

"I have, mademoiselle."

She laughed lightly, but, not seeing her face, he knew not how to interpret her laughter, so said:

"Do you not think me entitled, if we are to be friends, to see your face, mademoiselle?"

"Do you wish to very much, monsieur?"

"Indeed I do."

"From interest in me or curiosity?"

"I confess to both."

"Suppose I tell you that I wear this veil because I am hideously ugly?"

"I cannot believe it," he answered, earnestly.

"Why?"

"Because your form is perfection, your hands are tiny, your voice full of music, your bearing the personification of grace."

"That might all be, and yet the face be homely."

"No, it would be impossible with you."

"Perhaps an accident, a desperate burn in childhood, may have made me hideous to look upon."

"Great God! I hope not."

"Ah, monsieur, you see how quickly your interest in me would cease did you know me as I am."

"Are you really disfigured?" he asked in a selfish tone of voice, which she seemed to catch and comprehend.

"In your sight, yes."

"I believe you are deceiving me."

"Wait and see."

"Then you will let me see your face soon?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day, if so you wish."

"Indeed I do."

"Well, monsieur, I will let you continue your ride with me until we reach the pine lands yonder. There, if you wish it, where there are no curious eyes, I will reveal my face."

"I thank you."

"Then, monsieur, we must part forever."

"Why do you say so?"

"I know that it must come to that, monsieur, when once you have seen me."

"I hope not."

Again they were silent for several moments, and then she asked, suddenly:

"Monsieur, will you answer me one question?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Are you married?"

His boasted power over himself received a severe test here, for she took him wholly by surprise; but he stood the ordeal well, and said in response:

"Is it interest or curiosity that prompts the question, mademoiselle?"

"I confess to both," was her reply, repeating his own words when he spoke of seeing her face.

"I am not married," he answered, firmly.

"Indeed!"

It was all she said, but somehow it made him feel uncomfortable.

"So you doubt me?"

"I have no reason to doubt your word, monsieur; but it seems to me that I had heard that Duke Despard, the Ruby King, was married."

"You seem to know the full appellation I bear."

"Oh yes, for such a personage as you are, monsieur, cannot but be an object of gossip; but here we are, entering the pines."

"And you say that we must part here?"

"Yes, when we have gone further on into the woods."

He glanced back, and now saw that her groom was not in sight.

"Why, where is your groom, for he is not in view?"

She looked back and said, indifferently:

"He has doubtless stopped to get some wild flowers by the wayside, knowing my fondness for them."

"You will not force me to leave you until he comes up?"

"Yes, monsieur, we must part within the moment."

"To meet again when, mademoiselle?"

She drew rein and turned her horse so as to face him.

Then she said, in a low voice:

"Monsieur, you ask me when we are to meet again, and I answer—never!"

"You ask to see my face, and I tell you that it is one that will cause you a pang of horror."

"Now, Duke Despard, behold!"

He fairly reeled in his saddle as he cried:

"Estelle!"

"Yes, and I shall keep my threat!"

She threw her hand forward, a report followed, and he fell heavily from his saddle, while her horse, frightened by the shot, sprung into the air and bounded away.

She made no effort to detain him, and like the very wind the animal ran back toward the city.

CHAPTER XXXIII. KIDNAPPED.

WHEN Duke Despard fell from his horse, Estelle Enders thought that she had killed him.

She had aimed quickly, but surely at his heart, and the weapon, though small, was deadly.

She had not loved the husband whom Duke Despard had killed, but all of her heart went forth to the man who had been his slayer, and readily had he won her.

He had told her that his duties kept him away from her much of the time, but she forced herself to be content with what time he gave her.

Of a passionate, jealous nature, some little thing, light in itself, excited her suspicions of him and thus aroused her jealousy.

Once she suspected him, and she sought proof.

Then she felt that he was neglecting her, and she determined to herself keep an espionage over him.

An adept at disguising herself, she sought various disguises, went to places where she expected to see him, and convinced that he was false, she promptly acted as the reader has seen, and with most deadly intention.

It was Estelle who played the old woman at the door of the Golden Chance, to whom Duke Despard gave a gold-piece.

It was she also who was the messenger who came into the *salon* and brought him the letter from herself.

She had watched him closely, and was schooling her heart to act once more, for she wished him dead, by her hand, rather than that he should love another.

Hers had been a strange life, for she never knew her own parents.

Reared by those who had adopted her, she had never been dear to their hearts, as their own children, and often had she felt it.

Loving no man as she grew to womanhood, she had accepted the hand of the man whose wife she became, because she was indifferent and felt that he would give her a home.

Her married life with him had quickly ended, and so she entered upon an existence that was all joy to her with Duke Despard, whom she idolized, and believed loved her as she did him.

And the belief was broken, and her nature was revengeful.

In disguise she had gone to the funeral of Loyd Ruggles, impelled by some strange reason, and she had seen Duke Despard seated by the gateway, with the Vailed Lady near.

She had seen him, as she looked back, raise his hat and join the horsewoman, and at once she determined to know who she was.

A woman is always a good detective, when love is the basis of her work, and it was not long before she had learned all that the public knew about the mysterious Vailed Woman who lived a life all alone.

By disguising herself as a maid, and applying there for work, she saw her without her veil but with her silver mask over her upper features.

"It is Lady Lulu," she gasped to herself, and she left soon after, promising to come that evening to work, for by a strange coincidence the strange woman needed the services just then of an assistant.

Telling the porter, as she departed, that she was engaged to work for madam, she in a cunning way got the information from him as to where madam took her rides and drives, and, having seen her horse, habit and veil as she passed her at the cemetery, she at once duplicated the three as near as was possible, while her form was the same in height and build.

Convinced that Duke Despard meant again to join the Lady Lulu, as Estelle was convinced the mysterious woman was, she arranged to thwart him, and the reader has seen how skillfully she carried out her bold plot.

As he addressed her in French, she answered him in that language, for she had spoken it from childhood, and what he said convinced her that he had not but once before met the Lady Lulu, outside of the Golden Chance *Salon*, and was striving to get better acquainted with her.

Leading him on she discovered enough to show her how false the man was to his vows to her, and her love turned to hate as intense, and she led him to the pine lands where she could reveal herself to him and end his career.

She saw him fall, and she believed she had killed him, and in a dazed kind of way let her horse take his own gait back toward the city.

But Duke Despard was not dead.

He had fallen heavily and lay for a moment stunned.

The bullet had hit him squarely over the heart, but, as he arose, it dropped to the ground at his feet, flattened by contact with some hard substance.

Stooping to pick it up he reeled, showing that he suffered from concussion.

Glancing at the flattened bullet he smiled grimly, passed his hands over his eyes and said:

"Three times, my good Ogre, your ingenious shirt of steel network has saved my life."

"But for it Loyd Ruggles would have sent his bullet through my heart, and my dove-like Estelle has just been foiled in her revenge by its good service to me."

"But that woman is as dangerous as an enraged tigress, and must be looked to."

"It must be her life or mine, and I have no desire to shuffle off this mortal coil just now."

"Great Caesar! to think that she was the Spanish Vailed Lady!"

"No, it cannot be, for she could not take the rôle."

"No, no, she has seen me with the Vailed Woman, was doubtless out riding and saw me, and put on that disguise to entrap me."

"And she did."

"Now, what is to be done?"

"I will catch my horse and return to the city."

"I hope that Thurston's men will make no mistake about capturing the real Vailed Lady to-day."

"She came on out to the lake, I am sure, riding rapidly, and that little spitfire, Estelle, has gone flying back to the city; but won't I give her a surprise by turning up alive when she thinks she has killed me."

"Yes, and I'll give her another surprise too, that she little dreams of, for two can play at the game of getting rid of one, and she'll find it out too."

"Now to catch my horse."

The animal was grazing near, and allowed himself to be easily caught.

Duke Despard's chest felt sore, where the bullet had struck, and, knocking the breath out of him, as it had, added to his heavy fall, he did not feel very lively, or in the best of humor.

Mounting, he sat in his saddle awhile, and then turned into the path leading to Jean, the fisherman's.

"I'll find out what the Vailed Lady has to do with these people," he muttered, and half an hour after he drew rein at the door of the cabin.

Jean had not heard his approach, and was seated in the door smoking a cigar.

He threw it away at sight of the stranger, but not until Duke Despard had gotten a puff of smoke, and said:

"You smoke a fine cigar, old man."

"It was a stump, sir, I picked up at the Lake Home," answered Jean, in broken English.

"Ah! you are easily contented. Take this and buy you some good cigars," and he handed him a ten-dollar gold-piece, which Jean took eagerly, asking:

"What am I to do for this, sir, for I have no fish?"

"I'm fishing now, old man, and I have golden bait, so don't nibble, but catch on to all I ask you, if you wish to see that piece of gold duplicated several times."

"Yes, sir."

"Who is the Vailed Lady that comes to your cabin quite often?"

"Don't know, sir, any more than that she comes here, talks with us, and goes away."

"Do you know her name?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever see her face?"

"No, sir."

"When was she here last?"

The old man hesitated and then said:

"Several days ago."

"What was the trouble up in the woods on that day?"

"I don't know any, sir."

"Old man, you are lying to me, as I know, so you had better understand that I am aware of all that happened and tell me the truth, for you will get paid for it in gold."

"And you'll get paid in lead, if you don't leave here."

"Go! I won't have you around my house trying to frighten that poor childish old man into telling lies."

"He has told you the truth about the woman, and we know no more."

"Go, or I shoot!"

The speaker was Mam' Clo, and she suddenly appeared in the doorway, a rifle to her shoulder, and the muzzle covered the heart of the gambler.

He glanced at the weapon, and said to himself:

"That rifle would send a bullet through my net shirt, so I had better accept her invitation to go."

Raising his hat politely he said aloud:

"My dear lady, I have no desire to intrude, only I was anxious to learn all I could about the mysterious lady."

"Did you hear me? Go, for this is a hair trigger, and my finger is touching it."

He bowed and turned his horse from the door, the old man giggling at his discomfiture as he rode away.

"Well, this is a bad day for the Ruby King," he muttered as he started back through the pines.

A few moments after he started, for he beheld the Vailed Lady coming along the path toward him, her negro groom about a dozen paces behind her.

"Now I shall meet her again," he said, and as they drew near to each other he came to a halt and raised his hat, while he said pleasantly, in French:

"Again we meet, fair lady."

She did not return his bow and held on her way without the slightest sign of having seen him.

"Permit me, mademoiselle to join you again to-day?" he said earnestly, as she was right by his side.

She gave no response, did not move in her saddle, and held straight on.

"Madam, did you not hear me address you?" he called out angrily.

But she had passed on, without looking back, and the groom was now near him.

"Say, my man, I would speak with you, so draw rein."

The negro made no reply nor any sign that he intended obeying.

Seizing the bridle-rein of the groom's horse, Duke Despard, maddened by all that had occurred, said sharply:

"You shall speak, you black imp, and tell me what I would know!"

The negro sat like a statue, offering no resistance.

But quickly back came the Vailed Lady, and she drew rein within arm's-length of Duke Despard.

Then out went her hand, and it held a pistol, while sharp, earnest were her words:

"Unhand my groom's rein, sir, or you die!"

The pistol was pointed squarely between his eyes, not at his body, and the gambler dropped the rein, uttered a curse, and driving spurs into his horse darted away like an arrow, while through his set teeth came the words:

"Foiled! foiled at every turn am I this day!"

A rapid gallop of several miles seemed to cool his temper, and yet he was in no amiable mood as he turned into the highway and rode toward the city.

Suddenly the sound of wheels behind him caused him to turn his head, and he saw Fred Thurston in his buggy, driving rapidly as though to overtake him.

Halting, he waited for him to come up.

"All right this time, Despard," he called out, as he brought his horses to a standstill.

"What do you mean?" sullenly asked the gambler.

"The bird is caged."

"The Vailed Lady?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Not twenty minutes ago, in the pines."

"She rode up to the carriage in which were my men as though to make some inquiry, when they caught her, blindfolded and gagged her, and drove rapidly away to the old cabin."

"But her groom?"

"He started to fly; his horse fell, throwing him against a tree and he was killed."

"It was the best way to get rid of him, and we left him there."

"You are sure this is all as you say?"

"Why, yes, Despard, for Tough, as I told him to do, at once started to the Lake Home to give me the information, and I met him just as he came out of the pines."

"Where is he now?"

"He has gone back to the cabin, while I came on, and was glad to see you ahead of me; but you look in ill-humor."

"I am not in a happy frame of mind; but this news cheers me up, and I will be at the Square to-night at ten sharp to meet the carriage, so there won't be any failure this time."

"There will be none, I assure you."

And Fred Thurston drove on rapidly, leaving Duke Despard to follow more leisurely.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FRAUDS IN CLOVER.

THE judge had gone to bed so exceedingly mellow that he had neglected to send word over to The Retreat of the arrival of his friend, Mr. Judah, but awaking the next morning, he arose and recalled his neglect.

"My head feels very large this morning—wonder if I can get my hat on?"

"Well, well, what a toper Jacob is, and who would have thought it of a child of Israel?"

"Bah! I'm all upset, but as the hair of the dog is good for the bite, I'll just take a drop to steady my nerves."

Arising for he had been soliloquizing while lying on his back in bed, he hastily went to a cupboard and partook generously of the contents of a black bottle which he found there.

The effect was gratifying to him, for he smacked his lips with gusto, and set about making his toilet.

One sock he found on one foot and one boot on the other, while his stock was about his neck, though the collar had badly wilted.

Making the additions necessary to have him presentable, he put on his Sunday suit, which was different from his every-day attire, in that he only wore it on the Sabbath Day and to funerals and weddings.

His white high Sunday hat, in the absence of his having any *crêpe*, had been artistically painted black to within a couple of inches of the top.

Having braced himself by another drink, the judge sallied forth to wake up Jacob Judah; but to his amazement that respected guest had been up some hours, had seen the cows milked, chickens fed, and from the old negro man and his wife had gleaned all the information he could regarding the judge, the neighbors and plantation life in general.

A good breakfast awaited them, Jacob saying nothing about having had a quart of milk half an hour before.

"Now, Judah, we will drive over to The Retreat," said the judge.

About like the house, as to repairs and age, was the judge's buggy, while the horse was an old settler, and went as if he was trying to guess which leg he was the least lame in.

The judge had sent to a neighbor to borrow his rig, hoping to fool Jacob, but the negro boy gave the snap away to the Jew by telling him the vehicle was in use.

Getting into the antiquated vehicle, which was a cross between a hearse and a carryall, the judge seized the reins and started for The Retreat.

The same ebony youngster who had held Colonel Faxon's horse, and gone to borrow the neighbor's rig, had been hurried off to announce to the master of The Retreat the coming of Judge Jeremiah Joslyn and his friend, Mr. Judah.

Driving up to the door, the judge threw his reins pompously to a negro attendant, and alighted, Jacob following with alacrity and the remark:

"This was a magnificent blace, chudge, so fine."

"My master is away on a drive, judge, having gone with Miss Fidèle, before your message came," said Uncle Ned, politely, while his thoughts were:

"Now I does hope master hain't got inter no money trouble that he has to have such poor white trash as these are visit him."

"All right, Ned, my boy, we can await his return," said the judge, pompously.

"Yes, sir, certainly, and if you'll be seated on the piazza, gentlemen, or there in the arbor on the lawn, I'll bring you some refreshments."

"Refreshments, Ned, my man, will be welcome, especially if they come in a liquid shape."

"I'll bring the decanters, sir, brandy, whisky and wine."

"Oh, schudge! did you vas hear that?" cried Jacob, as Uncle Zeke disappeared.

"Yes, Judah, you are in this neighborhood, among hospitable people, I can assure you, and all of us know what is what, though I guess I'm about the oldest gentleman of the old school among us planters."

"You looks it, schudge," mildly said Judah.

Seeing Uncle Zeke approaching, Judah whispered.

"What vas de nigger man's name, schudge, so dat I can get acquainted mit him mineself?"

"Ned, his name is Ned; oh, I know them all over here at The Retreat, Jacob, for I'm at home here; eh, Ned, my boy?"

"My name is Zeke, master, or Zekiel; we have no one on the place named Ned," said Uncle Zeke, mildly, as he placed the silver tray

upon the table in the arbor, for they had adjourned there in preference to the piazza.

"Ah yes, so it is Zeke; I was thinking of my own butler; but, Zeke, my man, how is Miss Phoebe, the colonel's fair cousin?"

"She's well, thank you, sir."

"Has she gone riding, too?"

"No, sir, she's at home."

"Ah! just tell her that Judge Jeremiah Joslyn is here, please, with a friend—ah! I have forgotten my wallet, which contains my cards and all my money; but it will be safe, as I left it in my boudoir."

"Yes, schudge, no von vill steal him," put in Jacob, innocently.

"There, gentlemen, is wine, and the brandy and whisky is in these decanters—shall I help you, or will you help yourselves?"

"We will help ourselves, Ned—I mean Zekiel—and you need not remain, but tell Miss Phoebe of my presence—ah, here is cake of all kinds; I never eat cake, Jacob, for it is only fit for women and children, but you take some, and that sherry goes well with sweets."

"You see, Judah, I know; as a gentleman of the old school, I know a great deal."

"This whisky is first-class, though not so old by two years six months as is mine."

"Still it is good, and as I would like to get some just like it I'll secure a small sample."

As the judge sooke he took a flask coolly from one of his numerous pockets and emptied about half the contents of the decanter into it.

Judah looked amazed, for he was surprised to find a man so like himself in his cunning ways.

Another flask then appeared, and, as the judge wished a little "brandy for a sample," the decanter was lessened of its contents.

A handful of cigars was then stowed away in another pocket, while Judah, who had no flasks, followed suit in this deal.

Suddenly a shadow fell upon the table, and a tall form stood in one of the arched entrances to the arbor, and the two rascals beheld gazing upon them the pale, stern face of Don Chetwynd.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BROKEN CONTRACT.

THAT Judge Joslyn and the Jew were amazed at the sudden appearance of Don Chetwynd upon the scene goes without saying.

Their guilty consciences smote them as they beheld that stern face, but it was with fear.

Brazen ever, Judge Joslyn sprung to his feet and extended his hand, while he cried earnestly:

"Why, my dear boy, Don, so glad, so glad! I have not seen you since your return, except at your father's burying, and then I held back from congratulations—I beg your pardon I mean from condolences, on account of my tender feelings," and the old rascal wiped his eyes with his huge red handkerchief.

Don Chetwynd uttered no word, but still looked, and the judge, growing more uneasy, broke out with:

"But how remiss in me not to present to you my dear friend, Mr. Judah, of New Orleans—Mr. Judah, Mr. Chetwynd; Mr. Chetwynd, Mr. Judah. Shake hands and become acquainted."

Jacob was willing and extended his hand, but he shrunk back from the stern words:

"I have met Mr. Judah, and, as he is your friend, Jeremiah Joslyn, he is doubtless, like you, a scamp."

"Mine gracious!" groaned Jacob.

The judge coughed, cleared his throat, swelled up like a bullfrog, and blurted forth:

"As a gentleman of the old school, young man, I will not tolerate such insolence, and—"

"Silence! Hear me, for I have just this to say, Joslyn, to you and to that man."

"You are both here for an imposition of some kind upon Colonel Faxon, and I warn you, if you attempt any illegal game, I will be on hand to thwart you."

"You have heard, so beware."

Without another word Don Chetwynd turned and strode away.

They saw him step to his horse, which his negro Kit, also mounted, was holding near the gate, and ride away.

Then the Jew gave a sigh that came from his boots, while he murmured softly:

"Holy Moses and t'e angels, schudge."

"Judah!"

"Schudge!"

"I shall call that man out and shoot him!"

"Don't do it, schudge."

"Why not?"

"Maybe he shoots you."

"Ah! I had not thought of that."

"But, as a gentleman of the old school, I cannot pocket his insult."

"You petter as pocket inscolts, schudge tear, than t'e pullets."

"True; but he shall not scare me, Judah."

"He vas scare me pretty quick already, schudge."

"Judah!"

"Schudge!"

"I must shun that young man, or I shall kill him."

"Petter you shuns him, or he makes a grave-yards mit you."

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"You have those papers?"

"I haf."

"The one to sign and the bogus paper?"

"Both of t'e bapers I haf, schudge."

"Good! we won't be scared, will we, but work our little racket on the colonel as soon as he comes—Ah! my dear lady, so glad, so glad!" and as the judge sprung quickly to his feet, Judah did likewise, thinking that Don Chetwynd had returned to kill them both.

But it was not he, but instead Miss Phoebe Faxon.

Poor woman, she had enjoyed aspirations for many long years, and, though rich, had never caught a beau.

Still she lived in hopes, though the time was drawing near for her to die in despair.

A man she adored, be he old, young, rich, poor, ugly or handsome; it was all the same to her, for he was of the "sterner sex," as she was wont to refer to mankind, while of women she spoke as "we gentle fair ones."

A good housekeeper, harmless, and yet a little daft on the subject of matrimony was Miss Phoebe Faxon.

The judge knew that she was rich, while she was not as much a "guy" in looks as he was.

"If I could but win her," he had several times thought when he had seen her out driving.

Once, at the races, she had gotten separated from her party, and the judge, who had "dead-headed" his way, was there and found her.

She appealed to him, and though he had caught sight of her party half a dozen times he systematically dodged them until he could fill her willing ears full of flattery.

Miss Phoebe was tickled immensely, and always spoke of the judge afterward as "that dear man who rescued me from the giddy crowd."

So Miss Phoebe came out to see the judge, when Uncle Zeke told her he desired to see her.

She had "primped" to a stunning degree, and with her ribbons and flowers looked like a young rainbow.

The judge had bent low to her, as she entered the arbor, kissed the tips of her fingers, with a smack that made Jacob start, and said:

"My very dear friend, permit me to present to you, my old and esteemed contemporary, Mr. J. Judah, an Israelite, from the gay city of New Orleans, where first I had the pleasure of meeting you, and which meeting I hope you have not forgotten, as it lingers in my memory yet, like the air of some divine melody."

"Oh, judge! how poetical you are; but I am glad to welcome Mr. Judah as your friend; be seated, gentlemen, and I will have more refreshments brought, for Zekiel seems to have given you but scanty supply."

The judge cast a triumphant glance at Judah as she spoke of welcoming him as his friend, but they both looked a little blank at the reference to the scant supply in the decanters and on the silver plate, for Jacob had eaten everything except a small piece which he had his eye on when Miss Phoebe made her appearance.

"It vas so nice to know you, Mees—vas your children pretty well?" said Judah, innocently.

"Oh!" came from Miss Phoebe's lips, in terror.

"Jacob!" yelled the judge.

"Miss Phoebe is not a married lady, but a young maiden, as you can see."

"Oh, my! I vas put my foot right in my mouf; den you vas haf no childrens, but I don't know it why you not told me, schudge."

The judge wished he could put his foot in Jacob's mouth, and if looks would kill, the Jew would have died then and there; but smoothing his brow, he turned to Miss Phoebe and told her how rejoiced he was at meeting her again, and that he had come over to see her cousin, the colonel, on business, but was delighted to find him away, as it gave him an opportunity to see her, all of which the simple old maid drank in with d light.

"I vas not married mineself," suddenly said Jacob, breaking in with the thought that was in his mind.

"Oh! you are an old bachelor then?" said Miss Phoebe.

"I vas not a young one."

"And you, judge, are a widower?"

"Yes, Miss Phoebe, the lamented partner of my life passed away from earth some years ago, leaving her Jerry to still struggle on in this vale of wicked tears," and the judge rolled his eyes about in a way that startled Jacob, who again looked to see if Don Chetwynd had returned.

"How sad," said Miss Phoebe, her voice full of sympathy.

"And do you not intend some day to marry, Mr. Judah?" asked Miss Phoebe sweetly.

"Not if I can helps mineself, I don't vas make von fool of Jacob Judah," was the frank response.

"Oh, you naughty man, to be so uncomplimentary to our fair gentle sex," and Miss

Phoebe shook her fan at him in a way that made him dodge, while he said:

"I was acquainted wid wimmens, for I has mudders, sisters, brudders, oncles, faders and nieces, and dey vas all alike."

Miss Phoebe was horrified, and the judge was contemplating murder, when the carriage drove up and Colonel Faxon and Fidèle alighted, both coming at once toward the arbor.

It was evident that the colonel was annoyed, by his looks, at finding the men seated there as his guests, Miss Phoebe entertaining them; but he was a gentleman, and hospitable, so he shook hands with the judge, gave Judah a welcome, and introduced Fidèle.

"I have seen Judge Joslyn before, but his friend I have not had the honor of meeting," she said, coldly, slightly inclining her head, while she added:

"Come, Cousin Phoebe, we will ask to be excused as these persons have called upon father on business, I am sure."

The "gentleman of the old school" winced at this, for he was no fool, and the ladies withdrew, the colonel calling out to Trip, who had come out to get Fidèle's wraps:

"Here, Trip, carry this tray into the house and tell Zeke to bring decanters that are full."

Trip took the tray, but she said in a low voice to Fidèle:

"Those decanters were full, missy, when Uncle Zeke took 'em out; but those two poor white trash are full now."

But Uncle Zeke soon returned with the contents of the decanters renewed, and after a glass with his visitors the colonel settled down to business.

The judge read over the document giving certain land and negroes as security, and the colonel glanced at it casually afterward, and asked:

"What interest am I to pay you, Mr. Judah, for six months?"

"Thirty per cent.," was the response, the Jew, having discovered that the judge demanded a large percentage, determined to make the colonel pay it.

"A tremendous interest that, sir."

"I takes risk, mine fri'nt, for I gif my mon- ish—"

"I will sign that paper for just twenty-five thousand dollars, and you pay me just twenty thousand in cash."

"I would not give this usurious interest, if I was not compelled to have the money."

"Vell, my dear, dat vas all right, for I vas not a mean mans."

"And judge, what do I owe you for your trouble?"

"My dear colonel," began the judge, who had not expected a fee at both ends for his legal services; but ere he had said more he wished to make himself solid with the planter, so said:

"I could not, as a neighbor, think of accepting anything from you, for, as a gentleman of the old school, I have pride, so say no more, I beg of you."

"I hope you will pardon my question, judge, and I will not offer payment; but will you not allow me to send you over a good road mare and buggy I have, and which I was going to offer for sale, as I really have more horses than I can use, while the wagon is too short for me, and I have never liked it; the horse is a good one, judge, and the buggy and harness have had but little use, so, with your permission, I will send them over at once."

"My dear colonel, I shall be ever so thankful, I assure you, sir," and the judge turned as red as a lobster with delight.

"Do not speak of it, I beg of you; but let us sign these papers, Mr. Judah, and you, judge, will witness I suppose."

"Yes, sir; where is the money, Judah?"

The Jew handed the package of bank-notes over and the judge said pompously:

"Just run over them, colonel, for this is business, sir, business, and it is best to have no mistake."

"Here, Judah, are pen and ink, right at hand, I see, so sign your name there, I will witness, and the judge can add his signature, and the work is done."

The Jew signed his name, but not to the paper the planter had read, and Judge Joslyn then put his signature with a great flourish, saying in a pompous manner, although he knew he uttered a falsehood:

"That signature has sent three men to the gallows, gentlemen."

"Oh, my!" said Jacob.

Colonel Faxon then took up the pen and signed his name, and the deed was done; but, just as he did so, two persons entered the arbor.

One was Don Chetwynd, the other was his valet and comrade, Kit.

The young planter was dressed in a handsome hunting suit, and carried a shot-gun, which, as he entered, he threw across to Kit, who skillfully caught it, while he sprang forward, seized the document just signed, jerking it from the Jew's hand, while, tearing it in pieces he cried sternly:

"Colonel Faxon, those men have deceived you cruelly!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

NIPPED IN THE BUD.

THAT Don Chetwynd's presence in the arbor was unwelcome is certain, and to Colonel Faxon, who did not like his discovery of the manner in which he was raising money.

The colonel sprang quickly to his feet and said sharply:

"Mr. Chetwynd!"

The Jew, seeing his fortune slipping from him, and maddened by it, drew a long-bladed knife from his breast pocket, and moved toward the young planter, while the judge, wishing to make a threatening demonstration, and being unarmed, for want of something better, leveled a metal match-box at Don Chetwynd, covering it with his hand so as to hide its harmlessness.

Kit saw these hostile demonstrations toward his master, and he quickly slung the shot-gun round, pointing it first at the judge and then at the Jew, while he called out:

"Say the word, master, and I shoot!"

This attracted the attention of both the judge and the Jew to Kit, and seeing his gun, they uttered a howl of terror in chorus, and ducked down behind the table with an alacrity that was ludicrous.

"Put up your gun, Kit, for barking dogs never bite," said Don Chetwynd, and turning to the planter, he continued:

"Colonel Faxon, I beg your pardon for my unceremonious coming, sir, but it was to save you from being robbed by this brace of scamps."

"That old rascal you know well, and this Jew is of equally low caliber with him, and they have a scheme together to rob you."

"Oh my!" groaned Jacob, from under the table, while the judge, seeing that Kit had lowered the gun, rose up in his dignity.

"Chetwynd, I do not doubt your good intentions; but, confidentially, I found it necessary to borrow some money, twenty thousand dollars in fact, and, not wishing to arrange it through the bank or my agents, I asked Judge Joslyn to do so for me, and his friend here brought me the money to-day."

"Upon an interest of twenty-five per cent—"

"No, Colonel Faxon, I will let you have the sum you named, and here it is, for I knew what you wanted, and you can pay it at your leisure with legal State interest."

"There, sir, are twenty one-thousand-dollar bills," and Don took the roll from his pocket and handed it to the amazed colonel.

"Oh my!" said Judah, now straightening up.

"But, Don—"

"No, colonel, do not refuse it, sir, for I can afford it, I assure you, and not cramp myself in the least."

"As for these men—"

"You will let me pay them for their trouble, and—"

"Not one dollar, sir, for though this paper is torn, it can be put together, and I will hold it against them."

"If I catch them at any more trickery, Colonel Faxon, I shall put this paper in your hands to use, that you may know how you were being duped, for there were ears that heard their plans last night."

"Had I suspected them of rascality, I would have quickly ended their villainy, and, as it is—" and the colonel's eyes flashed fire, while Don said, quickly:

"No, colonel, this is a lesson to them, and let them go now, but beware of any more trickery in this neighborhood."

"Oh my!" sighed Jacob, while the judge concluded to play a little bluff game, and began with:

"Sir! sir! as a gentleman of the old school, I will not—"

"Kit, escort these gentlemen to their carriage."

"Yes, master."

"Your gun is loaded and cocked?"

"Yes, sir."

"And has two barrels?"

"Yes, master."

"Go!"

Had Don Chetwynd been starting a horse-race, the jockeys could not have responded more promptly to the word than did Jacob Judah and Judge Joslyn, for each disappeared through the archway of the arbor nearest behind him, while Kit followed quickly with his gun.

Colonel Faxon was convulsed with laughter, and threw himself back in a chair and roared, while Miss Phoebe, from her window, in vain tried to make the judge see that she was waving him a farewell from her kerchief.

"They seem in such a hurry; but I guess they wish to catch a boat at the landing," sighed Miss Phoebe.

Old Nebuchadnezzar had often carried the judge home when the latter was paralyzed with liquor; but never before had he known him to belabor him with the whip as he did on that occasion, and Jacob thought he had escaped death by Kit's gun to be killed by the roadside.

But they reached Barrister Hall without accident, and once on the piazza in safety, looked at each other.

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"Let's take a drink!"

"Oh, my!" and they hastened into the house to carry out their intention of "bracing up" after the severe ordeal through which they had passed.

In the mean time Don Chetwynd, amused in spite of himself, had spied the Jew's money on the table, and said:

"I will take it to him, as he seemed to forget it."

"Don, you have done me a great kindness, and believe me I appreciate it; but not a word of this to Fidèle."

"Oh, no, sir," and Don Chetwynd hastened away.

Kit was at the gate, lying on the grass and laughing until he cried at the flight of the judge and the Jew, and in spite of the sorrow he held in his heart Don joined in.

Their horses were near, and soon they were galloping on after the rickety vehicle.

"Kit, you did some good detective work for me last night in going over to that old fraud's and hearing their whole plan, and I'll not forget you for it," said Don, as they rode along.

"Master, you never forget me, sir, and if I could choose to-day between my freedom away from you, and slavery with you, I'd take the latter," was the honest response.

"I appreciate all that you are to me, Kit, and will tell you now that I had Judge Thatcher make out your freedom papers, so that if aught happened to me you would no longer be a slave to any man; but here we are at the gate, and the judge has beaten us badly."

"He made that old nag go this time, sir; but, master, please let me stay out here and wait for you, as I'd laugh right out if I saw 'em again."

"All right, Kit."

And laughing himself, Don rode into the yard and up to the piazza.

Just as he did so the two worthies came out, smacking their lips, and both turned pale at sight of him, while Judah looked as though he hadn't finished his race and was going to start again.

But the young planter called out:

"Ho, Mr. Judah, you forgot your money and I brought it to you."

"Count it, please, and then write me a receipt for it."

"Oh, my!"

And Judah quickly ran over the bills, and going into the house wrote out a receipt.

"Mr. Chetwynd, sir, I take this opportunity to say that I cannot but feel deeply hurt at your conduct, in impugning to me, a gentleman of the old school, sir, motives of an illegal character."

And the judge strutted about like a rooster in his own barnyard.

Calm and to the point came the answer:

"Judge Joslyn, if you think that I have wronged you, hold me responsible, or bring me into court that I may show the document that your signature is to, with that of your skin-flint friend, and to which Colonel Faxon attached his name."

"The other document, which Colonel Faxon thought he signed, is also in your writing, and I have it here, as Mr. Judah dropped it while crawling under the table."

"Do you wish to press the matter, Judge Joslyn?"

"No, no, my young friend, for I loved your father too dearly ever to wish to quarrel with the son, and when I could help him I did—"

"Ah! that reminds me that I found, in looking over the papers, numerous I O U's of yours for cash loaned you; but do not fear I shall press you with them now— Oh, here is Mr. Judah."

And reading the receipt, Don continued:

"This is right; good-day, gentlemen."

Wheeling his horse he rode homeward, satisfied in having done a great service to the father of the maiden who had refused his love.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

UNVAILED.

I MUST now return to the characters of my story whom I left in New Orleans.

It will be remembered that Fred Thurston had reported to Duke Despard the capture of the Vailed Lady and the death of her negro groom, and that the gambler had something in this to in part reconcile him for what had gone wrong during the day.

He went to his rooms and, as it was growing dark, went out into the street, and calling a hack ordered the driver to take him to the river.

Here he secured a small skiff, and telling the hackman to await his return he rowed rapidly away in the gathering gloom.

His destination was the ruined chapel, where dwelt the old hermit priest.

Landing at the spot where he had before met the padre, he found him seated in the little arbor, gazing out over the moonlit waters.

"Ah, my son, you kept not your appointment with me," said the priest.

"No, padre, and I could not send you word, as no one I knew would bring a message to your ruin, and I could not come; but I am here now to tell you I will be here before midnight, perhaps by a little after ten."

"And the lady?"

"I will fetch her."

"The secret chamber is ready for her."

"Thank you, padre."

"You wish her guarded against escape?"

"I do."

"I will care for her for a few days, but no longer, my son, and I will not sustain you in any wrong doing, as you know."

"I understand, padre."

"Well, my son, will you come to the ruin with me and have a glass of wine, for the night is chill?"

"No, thank you, padre, I must be going."

"Perhaps it would be well to bring with you to-night for the lady more dainty food than I am wont to partake of."

"Well thought of, padre, and I will do so—*au revoir*," and returning to his skiff the gambler rowed back toward the city.

He found the carriage awaiting him, and telling the boatman he would need the skiff again, and would send him down a package to keep for him, he drove to a fashionable grocery and bought quite a supply of provisions, so that his fair prisoner should at least want for nothing to eat.

"Now I will go to the Golden Chance and see if Thurston is right regarding the Vailed Woman being the Queen of Fortune," and he ordered the driver to set him down at the *salon*.

Entering, he found few there, for it was too early for the regular frequenters to drop in, they scarcely ever appearing until after the theaters were over.

Bird Bronson greeted him with his usual welcome, and said:

"You will have your own way to-night, Despard, as you are always in luck excepting at Lady Lulu's table."

"Ah! and why may not luck come to me at her table?"

"You know she is the Lady of Luck, Despard, and fortune never deserts her."

"It certainly did two nights ago when Don Chetwynd played against her."

"Was not that remarkable, for her luck is phenomenal, yet he won steadily?"

"If he can win from her I can too."

"You will not have the chance to try to-night."

"Indeed?"

"She is not on duty to-night."

"I hope not ill?"

"Well, no, but she took a long ride this afternoon and has not returned."

"I should think you would feel anxious about her," and Duke Despard could hardly suppress the delight the gambler's words gave him.

"No, she is well able to take care of herself, and she left word she might not return until late, as she has gone to meet some old friends."

"Ah! I am sorry I shall not be able to try my luck against her to-night, but will do so at another time."

"But tell me, Bronson, what effect did it have on the Queen of Fortune to have Don Chetwynd break her luck?"

"None that I could see."

"Was she on duty last night?"

"Yes."

"And played?"

"Oh, yes."

"With what result?"

"She won, of course."

"I thought that, perhaps, her good-luck once broken, she might have a run of bad luck?"

"No, it did not so turn out; but you play to-night?"

"Certainly; but one question, Bronson?"

"Well?"

"Do not be offended, but tell me what that woman is to you?"

"That is none of your business, Despard," was the curt reply.

"I admit it, but I wished to know, so asked," was the cool response, and Duke Despard turned to a table near and began to play, betting largely as was his wont.

His good luck did not desert him and he won steadily.

From table to table he hastened, stopping but a few moments at each, and then stopped before the one where was the Queen of Fortune's vacant chair.

Colfax was dealing, and the gambler threw down a roll of bills.

The dealer shoved him over his winnings, and nodding good-night to him he left the *salon*, going at once to the Square, for it was time that the kidnappers with their prize should be at the rendezvous.

As he reached there he heard the rumble of coming wheels and soon a carriage halted near him.

Tough sprung out, and Duke Despard asked quickly:

"Is she here?"

"Yes, mister."

"Is she bound?"

"More than that, for she's a wild one, and I

had to tie her mouth up, blindfold her and put her pretty feet and hands in cords too."

"So much the better, she will be easier to carry."

"You get on the box with the driver and go with me, but let your other men go."

"Yes, mister."

The gambler then sprung into the carriage, while Tough mounted the box, and, having told the driver where to go, the vehicle rolled away.

In a short while it drew up on the river-bank near a cabin, and the boatman came out to meet them.

"Tough, help me to place this sick lady in the skiff," said Duke Despard, and the unresisting form was raised in their arms and carried to the skiff.

"You can go now and dismiss the carriage," said Duke Despard, placing some money in the open palm of the kidnapper.

"Yes, mister."

"Boatman, I will soon return, for I intend to take this lady across the river to her home."

"Yes, sir."

"And count over these until I come back, and let me know if you cannot keep your mouth closed if questions are asked."

"Indeed I can, sir," and the boatman chuckled inwardly at the large roll of bank-bills handed to him.

Seizing the oars, Duke Despard rowed rapidly down the river, and arriving at the Padre's Landing found that person awaiting him.

"I will unfasten the bonds upon your feet, if you will promise to give me no trouble, so that you can walk," he whispered.

She nodded her head, and freeing her, he aided her to the shore.

Then, with his arm clasped in hers, he followed the priest.

"There is the chamber, my son, the key is in the door, and a lamp is within."

"I will be in my room if you need me," and the padre walked off with the large package of provisions which the gambler had asked him to bring from the skiff.

Into the stone-walled chamber, which was not, however, an unpleasant one, Duke Despard led his captive, and told her to be seated.

She dropped down into a chair in silence, and then he unbound the bandage from about her mouth, and which had been concealed by the thick Spanish veil.

She gave a sigh of relief as she felt her mouth freed, and then he took the handkerchief from off her eyes.

Her face was still concealed by the veil, and without raising it he unbound her hands.

Instantly she raised one, threw up her veil and Duke Despard staggered back as he almost shouted her name:

"Estelle!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PRISONER.

NEVER in his life did Duke Despard receive a greater shock, than when in his prisoner, which he had brought to the old ruined chapel, he beheld Estelle Enders.

His first thought was that she must indeed be Lady Lulu, knowing as he did that the Queen of Fortune had not been in her accustomed place that night in the Golden Chance.

Then he was furious with Fred Thurston, and next his anger turned upon the captive herself.

She stood gazing upon him also with a strange look in her eyes.

A few hours before she believed she had killed him; but, in the darkness, when in the carriage, she had recognized his voice, and she felt some dread of her fate, when she knew that she was in his power, being carried whither she could not tell.

She believed that she had been purposely captured by him, to gain revenge of some kind upon her; but when she saw his start, as she raised her veil, she then knew that she was not the one he had thought her, or intended she should be.

"Yes, sir, I am Estelle, and you seem disappointed that I am not some one else," she said, looking him straight in the face.

"Girl, you have thrice attempted to take my life, and I shall now see to it that you are put where there will be no danger of your trying it again. Good-night."

Quickly he had glided out of the door, ere she was aware of his intention, and too late she sprung forward to detain him.

She heard the key turn in the lock and knew that she was a prisoner.

Having locked the door, Duke Despard went in search of the padre.

He had seen a wicked glare in the eyes of Estelle, and he did not know but that she might still be armed and again try to kill him, so he had quickly made his retreat.

"Padre, the lady there is a little deranged, and may be violent."

"She may also tell you numerous stories, all of which you will understand are the imaginings of her brain, so can comprehend her ravings."

"I hope to be down within a couple of nights to relieve you of your charge, and, in any way

that I can prove my appreciation of your kindness, please command me."

"I wish no thanks, my son, for I but serve one to whom I owe much."

"I will do all in my power for the unfortunate girl, believe me," said the priest, and he walked with the gambler to the river-bank.

"She is perfectly safe, father?"

"Yes, my son; a bird could not escape from that secret chamber, while it is also not uncomfortable, and I put it in the best order I could with the limited means at my command."

"I thank you, padre. Good-night, and expect me in three days at the furthest," called out Duke Despard as he rowed away.

It was after midnight when he reached the cabin in the city where he had gotten the boat, and yet he decided to drop in and see if the Queen of Fortune had returned to her place at the *rouge et noir* table.

To his surprise and chagrin she was seated in her accustomed chair, nodding as was her wont when Colfax was dealing and the crowd was not numerous about her.

She looked just the same, as far as Duke Despard could see, and smiled a welcome as he advanced.

"I have been here to-night once before, Lady Lulu, but failed to see your bright face," he said.

"Yes; I went out for a ride, and was detained."

"I trust you enjoyed it."

"I did, very much," was the quiet reply.

"By the way," said Duke Despard, drawing nearer to her, and leaning upon the rail that fenced in her chair, "did you ever meet in your rides this mysterious Spanish lady they talk so much about, and whose veil hides her face even more than your mask hides yours?"

He watched her closely as he put the question to her, but she did not change color, met his glance without flinching, and answered:

"Is she the one I have heard spoken of as the Vailed Unknown?"

"Yes."

"No, I never met her in my rides, though I confess to a curiosity to see her."

"I wish that some time I could enjoy the honor of a ride with you; but I do not remember to have seen you on horseback."

"I allow no one to escort me, Mr. Despard, and I am very whimsical in my rides, going when I please, where I please, and doing just what I like, while, strange as it may seem to you, I like my own company best."

"It certainly is most delightful company, so who can blame you; but will you not relent and let me accompany you to-morrow?"

"No, I will not, sir, for when I form a resolve I keep it."

Duke Despard was at fault, and he saw that he could find out no more from Lady Lulu, so he replaced his hat and threw down some money on a card.

He won almost instantly, and Colfax pushed him his money.

Again he bet, and won as before, seeing which the Queen of Fortune said sweetly.

"Do you not wish to be avenged on me, Mr. Despard?"

"Indeed I do, as soon as my luck holds good here for a while."

She bowed in acquiescence, and he began to stake his money heavily, which drew the usual crowd that loves to see a man win or lose large sums.

After winning several large bets, Duke Despard said:

"Now, Lady Lulu, I will place my luck against yours."

"Here, I put all I have won from Colfax on this card."

"I will stake a like amount, sir, that you lose the game."

And the Queen of Fortune began to shuffle the cards, Colfax having yielded to her.

All looked on with interest, the game was played and the Queen of Fortune won.

"It seems that I am doomed to lose against your play, Lady Lulu; but it's a long lane that has no turning. Good-night."

He walked leisurely away, and an hour after was sleeping in his elegant rooms as peacefully as though he bore no stain on his soul.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN.

THE man who had reported to Duke Despard that the Vailed Lady had left her home for a ride on horseback had not been mistaken, for she had started forth with her groom and taken a street leading to the lake drive.

She had ridden very rapidly, and held on her way through the woodland, directly for the cabin of the old man who was known as Jean, the fisherman; but, changing her mind, she had gone on to the Lake Home, and it was quite a while before she returned to where the path branched off through the woodland.

Little dreaming what had occurred in the shadow of those woods a short while before, the Vailed Unknown rode on her way toward the cabin of old Jean, the fisherman.

She started slightly as she suddenly espied Duke Despard coming along the path toward

her, but at once determined to utterly ignore him, which she did, until he seized the rein of her groom, when she went back to the rescue in a way that the reader knows.

"Coward," she hissed through her teeth as the gambler rode rapidly away, and continuing on she soon drew rein before the cabin door.

Jean and his wife both gave her a cordial greeting, and yet she seemed to read in their faces that they had rather she had stayed away.

But she appeared not to notice this and asked, as though in ignorance:

"Who was the horseman I met in the woods, not far from here, and looking as though he had just left your cabin, Papa Jean?"

"Some fancy city swell, who came here for information and got badly scared."

"Ah! how was that?"

"Mam' Clo frightened him, for he began asking questions about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, Cherie, he wanted to know who you are, what we knew about you and all that."

"Do you know I have the same curiosity about myself, though I cannot see what business it is of his?"

"Why, Cherie, how you talk," said Mam' Clo.

"I do wish to know just who I am?"

"Why, you are Cherie."

"Nonsense, Mam' Clo, do not think I am a child to be deceived any longer, for I am not."

"Who would deceive you, Cherie?"

"You would, and Mam' Clo would, and you both are deceiving me all the time, and have done so all these years."

The old people looked uneasy, and the woman continued:

"What was your name, Mam' Clo, before you married Papa Jean?"

"I declare, I have almost forgot."

"Was it not Clotilde Dumas?"

The woman turned very pale and said:

"Why, where did you get hold of that name, Cherie?"

"And you, Papa Jean, what is your other name?"

"Only Jean, child."

"I know I was called Cherie Jean; but why did you not let me know, as I grew up, that your name was Jean Barancas?"

"Why, Cherie, we were poor folks, and one name was good enough for us," whined the old man.

"You told me nothing, and yet I was twelve years of age before you sent me away from here to boarding-school."

"I went there a perfect little savage, for you taught me nothing, went from this palatial mansion to a boarding-school full of rich and aristocratic girls."

"But I had pride, and I had beauty, with brains in my little head as well, and so I won my way up, and I studied and learned the world, I studied people, and I know to-day my power; but I did not know it when I left school, and so, when you came to see me in the city and told me I must marry one whom you selected for me, I did so without a word."

"But I now know what a false step I made, to marry a man I did not love."

"Oh, Cherie, why do you talk thus?" groaned the woman.

"We did it for your good, Cherie," the old man said.

"I have not done yet, for I have more to say to you both, and that is, I know that *you are not my parents!*"

They both uttered a cry of commingled alarm and amazement, and sat glaring at her.

"I do know it, and I wish you to tell me who I am, for that is the secret you are keeping from me."

"Cherie, my child—"

"Don't call me your child, Mam' Clo, for I know I am not."

"I know that you kidnapped me from my parents for some purpose of your own, or were paid to do so by others."

"Come, I want the truth, from beginning to end, for I will have it."

"Cherie, there is nothing to tell, for you are our child," said the woman.

"I have never felt that I was, and now I know that I am not."

"As you seem to think I am guessing, I will prove to you that I know of what I am talking," and going to the door she called out in a ringing, flute-like voice:

"Pedro!"

"Si, señora," came the answer, and a few moments after Pedro came up with the horses.

"Pedro, leave my horse here, but mount yours and return to the city for me."

"Get a hack and take it to the house at which I stopped coming out here."

"Yes, señora."

"You saw the person I talked to there?"

"I did, señora."

"Bid that person get into the carriage and come here with you."

"I will, señora."

"Now go, and do not delay."

"I will ride like the wind, señora," and Pedro went off in a sweeping gallop.

"For whom have you sent, Cherie?" anxiously queried the woman.

"For one who can tell me the truth if you do not."

"Oh, Cherie!"

"Bewailing will do no good, nor will pleading."

"I will know the truth, who I am, and why I was brought up as your child, when I have not one drop of your blood in my veins."

"No, no, you do not know this, Cherie."

She tossed her head impatiently, and answered:

"A month ago I observed in the palatial Purgatory, where I reign as Queen of Fortune, an old gentleman with snow-white hair and yet an erect form and the movements of a man twenty years younger."

"He regarded me most attentively, and yet not with impertinence, and I asked who he was."

"I was told that he was a gentleman of vast wealth, a bachelor, and that he had lately returned from Europe, having been abroad for two years."

"Night after night he came, and several times he spoke to me in a casual way, and seemed to listen most attentively to my voice when I replied to him."

"Two nights ago he handed me a slip of paper and then walked rapidly away."

"Here it is, and it reads:

"This gambling hell is no place for you, nor is it where I meant you should be."

"Go to number —, on — street, and you'll find the home of an aged octoroon, whose name is Future De Sauld. Show her your face and ask her who you are, for she can tell."

"Such was the paper, Mam' Clo, and I went to-day to the octoroon."

"She looked into my face, for I raised my veil, and I saw her start, and asked her if she knew me."

"She said that she did, and when I asked her to tell me all, she referred me to you, saying if you refused, to send for her and she would confess all, for she was nearing the grave and did not wish to die with the memory of a crime in her heart."

"As you refused me, I have sent for her, and to her will the law show mercy, and not to you."

"Mercy, Cherie, oh, mercy!" and the aged couple dropped upon their knees before the woman who accused them of crime, and denied that they were her parents."

"Will you speak, or shall I give you over to the law?" was the stern question."

"Will you spare us if we confess all, Cherie?" cried the old man."

"Yes."

"You promise, Cherie?"

"Yes, I said."

"Then tell her, Mam' Clo, tell her."

The woman's face was now harder than ever, and her voice was harsh as she said:

"If I must, I must, for you have promised not to harm us, have you not?"

"I have."

"Well, girl, it goes back over twenty years, to before you were born."

"Your mother—"

"Thank God, you are not my mother!"

The woman winced, but continued:

"Time was when I was young, and as beautiful as you are; but it is of your mother I would speak."

"She was very lovely in face and form; in fact you are her image."

"She had many lovers, and among them was a man of vast wealth, some ten years older, and who swore she should be his wife, though she did not love him."

"Your father was a dashing, handsome young man, and a soldier, he won your mother's love at first sight."

"I loved your father with all my soul, girl; but he cast me aside for your mother, though I must say he never gave me reason to feel that I could win him."

"I hated your mother because she won him, I hated your father because he loved her, and the rich man of whom I speak, finding he could not win, picked a quarrel with your father, a duel followed, and he very nearly lost his life in the encounter."

"When he recovered, your mother had married your father, and I, in my despair, had married this man, Jean Barancas, whom I had before discarded, and who was then rich."

"But Jean soon after lost his money, and we became very poor, and had come to this very cabin to live."

"Jean then fished for a living, and we lived a cat-and-dog life, for we had been accustomed to every luxury."

"One day who should visit us, but the man whom your mother had discarded and your father had so nearly killed in a duel."

"He told us that your mother had just given birth to twins, and he wished revenge, and would pay us well to do his bidding."

"This was that your mother's nurse, an octoroon, should steal one of the twins, and give it to me, and that I was to raise it as my own child, and for this we were to have a handsome sum to live on each year."

"I had just lost my baby, and was glad to adopt one, for I was growing very bitter in my sorrows, disappointments and poverty, so I consented."

"The octoroon drugged the nurse who took charge of you, stole you from her side one night, and handed you out of the window to me, and I brought you here, and here you remained until you were nearly twelve, when the man, who each year gave us a handsome living, made us send you to school."

"He paid all expenses, dressed you like a princess, and feeling remorse, I think, meant to restore you to your own home."

"Fearing we would lose our money, we determined to prevent this, so took you away, while your guardian, if I may call him such, was North."

"There was one man who had seen you, and loved you, and he wished to make you his wife, so Jean here told him he could do so for ten thousand dollars."

"He paid the sum to us, and you were married to him, as you know, and we told your guardian on his return, that you had run off and married a foreigner, who had taken you abroad."

"He at once started to Europe to find you, and, until his return a month ago, we continued to draw our yearly dues from him; but then he stopped our income, saying that it was our fault that you ran away, and that he could not find you the world over."

"Now you know all."

The woman paused and the poor girl who had listened to her story without a word of interruption said coldly:

"How much did you get each year?"

"About a thousand dollars."

"Don't lie to me, for I will know all."

"Just two thousand."

"You managed to save up half of that, did you not, in spite of your luxurious style of living?"

"Well, Cherie, we did save a few hundreds each year," said the man.

"I am just twenty years old, by your reckoning, and five hundred a year saved gives you ten thousand dollars laid by, which with the same sum you sold me for, and interest, makes you both comfortable for your future years."

"There was a necklace about my neck when I was stolen—give it to me."

"But, Cherie—"

"Give it to me; and more, tell me where I can find my parents."

"They will prosecute us, and—"

"I will not betray you, I said."

"You will find your name and that of your father and mother, with date of your birth on this locket; it also contains your parents' miniatures."

And the woman brought out a handsome locket of gold attached to a chain.

The poor girl's hand trembled as she grasped it, but without looking at it she thrust it into her bosom and quickly arose.

"As you have told me all, I will stop the octoroon on her way out."

"If I need other information I shall seek it of you, but I will not betray you."

"As you have never been parents to me, I have no regret in parting with you."

"Good-by, Mr. and Mrs. Barancas."

She bowed haughtily and walked out of the cabin, and springing upon the back of her horse rode away just as the sun was touching the horizon.

Coming upon the body of her groom, she sprung to the ground and saw that he was dead.

His hand still grasped the rein of his horse, which stood by him, and the wound on the head, the tree near by, showed her that the man had come to his death by being thrown from her horse.

Leaving him thus she rode on into the town and sent word to the proper authorities, after which she dressed herself and entered the *salon*, her book in hand, and no one dreaming all that she had heard and passed through a few hours before, for beneath that silver mask her lips wore a smile as sweet as though no grief had ever touched her young heart.

CHAPTER XL.

ESTELLE.

To explain how it was that Estelle Enders found herself a captive in the ruined chapel, instead of the Mysterious Unknown, I must return to the time when, believing she had killed Duke Despard, she dashed away like the wind, allowing her horse to go where he pleased.

Dashing swiftly along, the animal had turned off the highway into a bridle-path in the timber, and it was not until quite a long run that his fair rider drew upon the reins to bring him to a stop.

The animal was very tired and ready for a halt, so she had no difficulty in stopping him, and lost in deep reverie she allowed him to stand still and rest.

At length she said slowly:

"I have killed him and he lies dead yonder, with no one to look after his dead body."

"I will go back and look upon his face once more, and then, then—well, God knows what I will do then, for oh! how I loved that man, loved him until I found him untrue."

"Then I killed him!"

She spoke the last four words savagely, and turning her horse, rode back slowly the way she had come.

Arriving at the spot, she beheld no dead body.

"Some one has removed him," she said.

She sought the exact spot where he had fallen, and saw not a stain upon the pine straw.

"Can my bullet have missed him after all?"

In vain was it that she searched the woods, for the space of several acres about the spot, for there was no trace of the man she believed she had killed.

"Fool! fool that I was! I forgot that he told me he wore a shirt of steel network impervious to bullets—that has saved him."

She had grown revengeful once more, and suddenly her eyes fell upon a carriage approaching.

It was an out-of-the-way place for a carriage, and she thought perhaps after all it might contain the body of Duke Despard, so she rode toward it.

As she did so, out of a thicket of scrub pines not far behind her came a horseman.

It was poor Pedro, the groom of the Vailed Unknown.

Riding up to the carriage, Estelle was quickly seized, believed to be, in her disguise, the one whom the gambler sought to kidnap, and, amazed at seeing his mistress, as he supposed her to be, when he had left her at the cabin, Pedro turned to fly; his horse fell, and throwing the negro against a tree, his life ended right there, while his arm was still enwrapped with the bridle-rein, which kept his faithful steed from running off.

Finding she was in the hands of kidnappers, Estelle resisted all in her power, but without avail.

The result of her capture the reader has seen.

When she was left alone in the secret chamber by Duke Despard, she stood like a statue, her eyes flashing, her bosom heaving.

Every atom of love she had held in her heart for the gambler had turned to bitterest hate.

She was like a caged tigress, and when a knock came upon the door she said, fiercely:

"Who is there?"

"It is I, lady, the padre, and I would speak with you, for I have something here to make you more comfortable."

"Are you a priest?"

"Yes, lady, an unworthy one I fear."

"And you hold me, a woman, captive?"

"If the one who placed you here, lady, means you harm, I would set you free before his face."

There was something in the tone of voice that sounded reassuring to the poor girl, and she said:

"Come in!"

He pushed open the heavy door and stepped within, bearing in his arms a heavy shawl and a package.

She stood where the light fell full upon her, and he stopped short, gazed upon her with a look that was a stare, while the articles he held dropped from his arms to the floor.

"Daughter, who are you? In the name of God I ask it."

She was surprised at the look he bent upon her, and more at his words.

She saw in his face that of a man who had suffered deeply, but was one that was good and noble, and she felt perfect confidence in him, so answered:

"My name is Estelle, father."

"Estelle! it was her name," he exclaimed, eagerly.

Then he stepped toward her and said earnestly:

"My child, in your face I see imaged one whom I loved in the long ago, one whom I made my wife, because I loved her."

"One day, while hunting in the forests on the Gulf Coast, I was severely wounded by a stag I had shot, but not killed."

"Alone, and wounded as I was, I would have died there had not I been found by one who was going through the forest, and she took me to her father's cabin, aiding me to her canoe near by in the bayou, and then rowing me there."

"Her father was a fisherman, dwelling in a humble home, but once had seen better days."

"His daughter was his only child, and her mother had been the daughter of an Indian chief, who had forsaken her people to become the wife of a pale-face."

"He welcomed me, and, skilled in surgery, he did all in his power for my recovery."

"I lay weeks in that lone cabin, but it seemed as days to me, for I had learned to love the beautiful Indian girl, had learned to love her with all my heart."

"I asked her to become my wife and she consented, and we were married six months after I met her, by a Catholic priest."

"Soon after her father died, and, to my great surprise, he left us a large fortune, in

gold, silver, and precious stones, which he had hidden away."

"How he obtained these riches I never knew, but my wife told me she thought he had found a treasure-box, and that it was some of Lafitte's buried treasures."

"I took my bride to the city then to live, and she created a great sensation, for we lived in fine style."

"There a child was born to us, a little girl, and a few months after business called me North and I left my home."

"Alas! I never saw my wife again, for a man who was my pretended friend had stolen her love from me, and innocent of the world, she had been lured to run away with him, deserting her child and husband."

"I followed them up the river where they had fled, and I forced him to meet me in a duel, and he fell dead at my shot; but alas! the same shot took her life, as she never recovered from the shock, and died soon after."

"I came back to my desolate home, gave my child in charge of a married friend, and placed in his keeping the fortune she was to have when grown up."

"Then I gave up the world and entering a monastery, became a priest, to try and devote myself to Heaven."

"Now, my child, you come before me tonight, the living image of my wife Stella, and you say that your name is Estelle?"

The girl had not taken her eyes from his face as he told his story, but now said:

"My mother's name was Stella, and she had Indian blood in her veins, I was told by those who brought me up, took my fortune, and married me to a rich man to cover up their robbery of me, and a man I did not love."

"My name is Estelle, and I was also told that my father had become a priest."

"Are you Frank Enders?" and her voice trembled as she asked the question.

"I was, but now I am Padre Franco!"

"Father!"

The cry rung through the ruined chapel and she sprang into his arms, while he said in a low, plaintive tone, again and again:

"My child! my child!"

For a long time then both were silent, and then the unhappy girl told her sad story, of her marriage, the slaying of her husband by Duke Despard, whom she loved and secretly married, and how he would not acknowledge her before the world, until, driven to despair she had sought to kill him.

"Well, my child, we will go far from here, for we can do good in the world with the little that I have."

"And I am not poor, father, for I have, in my name, the money Duke Despard gave me, and which he won from my first husband."

"I will draw it from the bank to-morrow, and we will seek a home elsewhere and I will, as you have done, devote my life to God."

And until the gray dawn stole into the ruined chapel, those two, father and daughter, so strangely met, talked over the past and planned for the future, while into their hearts a ray of sunshine crept at last.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RUBY KING RECEIVES A LETTER.

FRED THURSTON went to the rooms of Duke Despard quite early the morning following the capture of the Vailed Lady, whom he had supposed was certainly the one he sought to make prisoner.

He had read in the morning papers that the body of Pedro, a Cuban negro, and the slave of a Spanish lady living the life of a nun in the city had been found dead in the pines near the lake.

The account stated that the negro had been sent on an errand by his mistress, and his horse had thrown and killed him, all the circumstances in the case pointing to this fact, and that the Vailed Nun had supplied liberal funds for his proper burial, and had herself sent in her statement of the affair.

"How the deuce can this be, when she's a prisoner?" Fred Thurston asked himself.

Not being able to answer the question satisfactorily, he determined to go and see the Ruby King.

Ogre opened the door for him, and said that his master was already up.

The fact was Duke Despard had not enjoyed the sleep he had hoped for when he retired, and, waking up soon after, the grim specters of conscience had kept slumber from his eyelids.

Rising early unrefreshed, it was a relief to have Thurston come in, and he asked quickly:

"What news?"

Thurston told him what the papers had said about the dead negro.

"That is all right."

"But it says she sent word."

"I guess she did."

"But how could she when she was your prisoner, Despard?"

"My dear Fred, she was not my prisoner."

"What do you wish me to understand?"

"I did not get the Vailed Lady."

"Nonsense."

"It is true."

"It cannot be."

"But it is."

"Did not my men meet you at Jackson Square last night?"

"Yes."

"In a carriage?"

"Yes."

"They brought you a lady?"

"They did."

"Vailed and in riding-habit?"

"Yes."

"And it was the one you sought?"

"It was not."

"Despard."

"Well?"

"Are you poking fun at me?"

"I am not in a funny humor, Thurston."

"Then out with it."

"You have seen a little friend of mine who lives on the river-bank?"

"Estelle?"

"Yes."

"Well, she got jealous of Lady Lulu, and watched me."

"She saw me with the Vailed Lady, and so took her cue from that, disguised herself, and you know the rest."

"And she it was my men caught?"

"Sure."

"But the negro?"

"Happened there at the time."

"Well, I am done completely."

"So am I."

"When did you find out the mistake?"

"When I got her to where she was to remain for a few days."

"It must have been a surprise to you?"

"I never had a greater one, Thurston."

"And is she your prisoner?"

"Yes, indeed, for she's dangerous."

"What will you do about it?"

"I have not yet decided."

"But I suppose you still wish to capture the Vailed Lady?"

"You know me well enough to be aware that I never leave a thing half-done, Thurston."

"Then I must try again?"

"Certainly."

"I'll lay my plans to-morrow for a new game."

"No, wait a few days, for I wish to decide what I shall do with Estelle."

"Then I have to go up the river on the Princess her next trip, though I shall return on her and be gone but a week."

"I see."

"When I get back I will be in time to have you kidnap this Vailed Woman, and we will know whether she is the Lady Lulu or not."

"I still say yes."

"And I hardly know what to say."

"If she be?"

"Why you win your bets, of course."

"Have you formed any plan regarding her?"

"Not exactly, but I wish her in my power, and I think I can force a secret from her that will be of vast value to me."

"Then, after learning that in disguise, I wish to rescue her, as it were, and thereby gain her friendship; do you see?"

"Yes, I see."

"Now let us have breakfast, and then I have to go out to the bank, for the Golden Chance broke me last night."

After breakfast Ogre brought in a letter for his master, and it had been left by a messenger who said there was no answer.

It was addressed in a hand which Duke Despard recognized, and he smiled with triumph as he said:

"Here is a letter from Estelle, Thurston, and she is begging for her pardon, I'll wager high."

Breaking the seal, the smile on his face faded away, and with set lips he read to himself the letter.

It was as follows:

"DUKE DESPARD:—

"SIR:—When you receive this I will be beyond your reach."

"I loved you with my whole soul, and now I hate you with the same intensity that I loved."

"I have but one thing to thank you for, and that is that you carried me last night to the ruined chapel."

"The man you made my keeper though now a priest, was once married, and I am his daughter, and he knew me at sight."

"In bitterness of heart he has long dwelt, a recluse, in that old ruin, and it seems that the Hand of Heaven sent me to him."

"My money, which you won from my husband, whom you killed, I have drawn from the bank, and what I needed from the house I have taken."

"Otherwise I leave all else for you, with old mammy in charge."

"It will be a cage all ready for you to catch some other unfortunate bird and imprison her in."

"My father accompanies me, and we go wherever we will never hear your hated name."

"I write to the noble man who saved me from death, Don Chetwynd, tell him just what I was to you, for all secrecy has ended now, and thank him for a life that I am now glad that he rescued, and, in referring to him, let me give you a word of warning."

"Beware of Don Chetwynd!"

"I have a presentiment that when your grave is made, he will be the cause of it."

"For what you were to me my father hates you as I do; but we will both pray that this bitterness may pass out of our hearts, as we will live for the good of our fellow-beings alone."

"May Heaven have mercy on your guilty soul when you come to die, is the prayer of"

ESTELLE ENDERS."

To this was added, in a bold hand, as though indorsing all, and especially the last, the prayer:

"Amen!"

PADRE FRANCO."

Several times did Duke Despard read over this strange letter, and then he consigned it to the flames, while he said half-aloud:

"And Don Chetwynd knows the secret that Estelle was my wife!"

"This is startling news, for through him it may reach Fidèle's ears, and then—"

"Well, Don Chetwynd has a secret that Fidèle Faxon must never know, and the way to prevent it is to carry out the old adage, that 'Dead men tell no tales!'"

CHAPTER XLII.

TWO OF A KIND.

THE scare which Judge Joslyn and his guest had received was greater than even Don Chetwynd had believed, for, as they talked the matter over in the library at Barrister Hall—they would not sit out upon the piazza—they decided that with the tell-tale paper in his hands the young planter could give them a great deal of trouble.

Naturally timid, the Jew took comfort in the bluster of the judge, and the latter was like a dog that runs home in terror and barks after he reaches his own yard.

He was frightened himself, it is true, but he saw his chance with the Jew, and exaggerated matters greatly, so as to keep from censure himself.

"This is an unfortunate state of affairs, Jacob, most unfortunate, for outside of law, if we should be pressed, why, these people stand not at all upon human life, and we are as likely to be lynched as not."

"Oh my! oh my!"

"And, Jacob, think of a gentleman of the old school being lynched."

"I don't want to think about it, schudge, dear."

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"Now my idea is that we will keep quiet for a few days, close the front of my mansion, and smoke our cigars and drink our whisky upon the rear piazza."

"I will tell my slaves that they must say I have gone away up the river to my other plantation—"

"Vere vas that other blantation, schudge?"

"In my mind, Jacob, but no one knows that, and I'd sell it if I could find a purchaser."

"No, I don't want to buy, my dear."

"You are right; but, as I was saying, we could remain here a few days and catch the Natchez on her down-trip, boarding her at a landing some miles above, where there will be no danger of seeing that fellow Chetwynd."

"Yes, I was glad if we don't see him."

"We can run down to the city, and when the matter has blown over I will return and get plenty of business for you among the young planters of this neighborhood, for many of them are a trifle wild and have to hedge on their incomes."

"Dat vas goot."

"Yes, that will be our plan, and we will make lots of money out of it."

"Of course this matter has turned out badly, but, Jacob, if you had not been in such a hurry to leave The Retreat, I would have remained and argued the matter with Faxon and Chetwynd, and convinced them that all was square."

"But you vas no could argue mit de gun t'e nigger mans haf, schudge; it say two vords, and vere vas ve?"

This clinched that argument, and the judge began another question at once.

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"How much are you out of pocket by this trip?"

"Vell, fifty dollars."

"I see, but I'll make that all right, Jacob; but I must tell you that you wish to buy a negro."

"Oh, my!"

"You are not a man unless you are a slave-owner, Jacob—look at me! I own slaves, and anybody can tell the difference between us."

"Now, Jacob, I know how you live, in a little shop ten by twelve, and all alone."

"You could do far more business if you fitted up your place and looked rich, while you are."

"Now, Jacob, you must buy a nigger."

"Oh, my!"

"You must buy a nigger, Jacob; but if it is startling to you, begin with a small one."

"Now I have just the one you want."

"He can cook for you, clean up things, and be worth a fortune to you."

"But, schudge!"

"Say no more about it, for you must be a slave-owner."

"You know my boy Jump? Well, he is just thirteen, if he's a day, smart as a whip and is devoted to you."

"He told me that he liked you, for you had given him a dollar or two, I believe."

"Schudge, did he says dat?"

"Yes, Jacob."

"I was vant to pay that nigger poys, schudge, pretty quicks."

"You are right, Jacob, and I will sell him to you cheap."

"How cheap?"

"Well, say a thousand dollars."

"A thousand tollars! Jurusalem Himmel! a t'ousant tollars for a nigger poys?"

"But he will grow, Jacob, he will grow, and he is only half-price now, you see."

"In five years he'll be worth fifteen hundred, and when he is twenty-one, two thousand."

"I give you five hundred tollars for t'e poy, Joomp, schudge."

"I'll take it, Jacob, as it is you."

"You vas law mans, so draw up t'e bapers."

"I'll do it," and the judge did draw up the papers.

"Here vas t'e monish, schudge, four hundred and fifty tollars, for you vas owe me fifty tollars for expenses."

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"You are not such a fool as you look."

"Vere is my poy?"

Jump was called and came upon the piazza with a hand-spring.

He was a bright-eyed boy of ten, and seemed glad when told he was going to the great city to live with Mr. Judah.

"Has you hosses, boss?" he asked.

"Dere vas blenty of horses in t'e town," said Jacob.

"All right, boss, I ride 'em fer yer."

"Well, Jump, get your mother to fix up your Sunday suit and have you ready for your visit to the great city with us," said the judge, and turning to the Jew he added:

"Jacob, I suppose you wish to buy the boy's wardrobe?"

"I vas haf blenty of old clothes dot I puts him in."

"But I cannot use those he has."

"Did you sell the poys mitout his clothes, schudge?"

"Oh, certainly, Jacob."

"Vell, how much?"

"Five dollars."

"Here it vas. Now vere vas t'e clothes?"

Jump was again called, and his clothes were brought, in all worth about twenty-five cents wholesale.

"Oh, my!" groaned Jacob, and as Jump carried back his "wardrobe," he continued:

"Schudge!"

"Jacob!"

"You vas not such a fool as you look."

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"I have an idea!"

"Vell, schudge?"

"You saw how Miss Phoebe Faxon doted on me?"

"Well, she loves me, Jacob—loves me with all the wealth of her fond heart, and I shall marry her."

"Oh, my!"

"She is rich, very rich, and I will have to call on you for a loan, perhaps, when I begin to give the bridal presents."

"But t'e colonel's?"

"I shall not ask him, but steal away with her and make her my loving bride."

"Then, as her money is in her own right, I shall be rich, we will fit this old mansion up, and I'll be a nabob, Jacob, a nabob!"

"Oh, my!"

Thus the two old rascals schemed, kept out of sight, and when the judge knew the Natchez was about due at the landing above, they slipped away in the darkness and were driven over to the river, Jump accompanying them.

It was ten o'clock when they boarded the steamer, one going by one door into the cabin, the other by the opposite one, they having slipped aboard singly.

Jump was at the heels of the Jew, carrying the baggage.

The two met in the center of the cabin, grasped hands, looked wistfully at the bar, and by common consent went to it.

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"We are here!"

"We vas!"

"Some of your best, bartender: such as a gentleman of the old school might drink."

They drank, and after going to their state-rooms and seeing Jump curled up on the floor, the baggage for a pillow, they returned to the bar.

Suddenly the whistle blew for a landing, and the judge started.

"What landing is that, bar-man?"

"The Retreat Plantation; we got a telegram above that Colonel Faxon and party were to go down—What on earth ails those two dead-beats?"

And the bar-man gazed at the two as they

hastened to their state-rooms, the judge having uttered but one word, which Jacob understood:

"Chetwynd!"

At the landing at The Breakers quite a party came on board, Miss Phoebe and Fidèle leading, then Uncle Zeke with the baggage and Trip loaded down with wraps.

Bringing up the rear was Colonel Faxon.

As the boat swerved off the judge looked out of his state-room door and called softly:

"Jacob!"

"Schudge!"

"We are safe, for he did not come on board."

"Oh, my!"

Then they dodged back as they saw two gentlemen enter the cabin forward.

They were Colonel Faxon and Duke Despard, the Ruby King Gambler, and they seemed to be talking earnestly together.

CHAPTER XLIII.

LOST AND WON.

COLONEL FAXON, when he boarded the steamer, went with his daughter and Miss Phoebe to their state-rooms, and then returned to the forward part of the boat.

Going out upon the guard as the steamer was swinging off from the landing, he met face to face with the Ruby King.

"You on board?" he said, coldly.

"Yes, colonel; I came up from the city on the Princess, but not caring to go the entire trip, stopped off and caught this boat two landings above."

"All well, I hope?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are few people on board, hardly any one, in fact, and I am glad to meet you, for I feel lonesome."

"I will be no company for you, as I retire soon."

"But we can have a little game together, colonel?"

"No, sir."

"Just one."

"No, I do not play cards."

"Indeed! a late resolve."

"Yes, one made a few days since."

"A card-player, colonel, is like a drunkard: they are taken with fits of reform, swear off and—play again."

"I shall not, for I am under a pledge."

"Have you pledged yourself not to play?"

"I have, to my daughter."

"Ah! but I can hardly believe a daughter has a right to so bind her father."

"My daughter, Despard, acted for the good of her father."

"She knows my weakness, and she knows how heavily I lost to you, and she asked me to pledge her that I would play no more, and I did so."

"Well, try a game for fun only."

They were now in the "Social Hall" of the steamer, and Duke Despard dropped into a seat at the round table generally devoted to card-players.

"No, I cannot play, Despard."

"See here, colonel, have you seen the new style of cards, with rounded edges at the four corners?—they are just out, and I like them immensely."

He threw a pack upon the table as he spoke and Colonel Faxon sat down to examine them.

"They are pretty, Despard, and must be easy to play with; quite a new and pretty idea," he said.

Just then Uncle Zeke came into the cabin, stopped, with a look of horror upon his face, and remained gazing at his master.

"Indeed, they are easy to play with, colonel; just shuffle them once and throw hands to see."

The colonel did so, and Trip came into the cabin aft, saw her master then Uncle Zeke, and going up to the latter, said:

"Oh, Uncle Zeke, can't you get master away from that bad man?"

"Oh! child, I don't know how; but I'll do my best."

Going forward, Uncle Zeke overheard what was said.

"I'll try you a game, colonel, on a small stake, just to pass away the time."

"Don't tempt me, Despard, for I cannot, I dare not."

"You fear to lose?"

"It is not that."

"What then?"

"My pledge."

"Bah! I would not be thus ruled about what I could do, and not do."

"You are old enough to judge for yourself as to right and wrong."

"Don't tempt me, I beg of you, Despard."

"Well, I suppose I need ask you no more; but I'll bet you a thousand dollars I win two games out of three, and we'll call it a thousand a game," indifferently said the gambler.

Quickly and excitedly came the response:

"I take the bet!"

The gambler did not even smile, while he cut the cards for a deal, but from the lips of Uncle Zeke and Trip came a wail, as they stood gaz-

ing upon their master, trying in vain to catch his eye.

The colonel's face was pale, and great beads of perspiration stood upon his brow, for he had struggled hard to resist the tempter, but had not the moral nerve to do so.

Once he had begun, broken his pledge, like the drunkard that breaks his resolution never to drink, he became reckless, and game after game was played.

Surely did the gambler win, until the twenty thousand in cash, loaned him by Don Chetwynd was gone, and then the colonel began to give his I O U's for his losses, hoping each game he would redeem himself.

But he only got deeper into the Slough of Despond, until the gambler held half his fortune, and in despair the colonel made a bet of fifty thousand on the next two in three games.

"My Lord, Trip, you must call Missy Fidèle, or he'll lose plantation, slaves and all."

"Go, child, go!" cried Uncle Zeke, and Trip at once sought her mistress's state-room.

Aroused from sleep by such a summons, Fidèle hastily threw on a wrapper, and with her long, red-gold hair streaming down her back, her face white, and her great eyes flashing angrily, she walked down the long cabin to where the two gamblers sat, so engaged as not to see her.

It was a most dramatic scene, for the two men sat at the table, the bar-man had come out of his bar and was looking on with the deepest interest, while the judge and the Jew, having gained courage, when they found that Don Chetwynd was not on board, had approached and were looking on, wondering at the desperate playing of the two gamblers.

Slightly in the background stood Uncle Zeke, his hands clasped, as though in prayer, while Trip followed closely behind her mistress.

"Father, come with me!"

The words fell from Fidèle's lips in a tone that showed she meant all that she said, and Colonel Faxon fairly crouched down before her touch and cried hoarsely:

"My child!"

"Come with me, father!"

"Good-evening, Miss Faxon," said Duke Despard rising and taking off his hat.

But Fidèle did not notice him more than with an indignant glance.

"No, no, my child, I must finish this play before I go; but then I will come, so go back, I pray you, to your state-room."

"I will not leave until you go with me."

"Permit me to suggest that the Social Hall of a Mississippi steamer, at one o'clock at night, is not the proper place for a young lady," said Duke Despard.

"I am the judge, sir, of my actions, not you."

"Come, father."

"I cannot until I play the game that our bets are now on."

"You must."

"Colonel Faxon speaks the truth, Miss Faxon, he must play these games out, or find a substitute."

"And I cannot find any one who will take my hand, my child, for it is for fifty thousand dollars, best two in three, and this next game decides, for Despard has won one, and I the other."

"I will take your hand, Colonel Faxon."

All started at the stern voice, and Don Chetwynd strode up to the table, followed closely by his valet, Kit.

"Don!" cried Fidèle, and she fell back.

"But, Chetwynd, my dear fellow, I have no right to let you play for so large a stake, and—"

"I can do better than you, sir, for I will watch my adversary," was the cool reply.

"Mr. Chetwynd is insulting," said Despard.

"I am glad you can appreciate what I said, sir; but I am ready to take Colonel Faxon's hand."

"You, for fifty thousand dollars?" sneered Despard.

"Yes, sir."

"This is on Colonel Faxon's note."

"I will stake the cash, sir," was the cool reply, and Despard looked annoyed.

"May I ask just what you have lost to-night, Colonel Faxon?"

"Yes, I have been a fool, for I have swamped the twenty thousand dollars cash you knew of, and have lost fifty thousand, with the same, about, on hand."

"One hundred and twenty thousand in all."

"Well, Mr. Despard, there is a package containing one hundred thousand dollars, just sent me from my agent by the captain of the Princess on her way up, and I will give my note for twenty thousand more, playing you for all, best two in three."

All were astounded at these words, and none more so than Duke Despard, who said abruptly:

"I will not take your note, sir, for you are a poor man, as I know, and this money doubtless belongs to some one else."

"If I play it and you win, it is yours, and mine is the blame: but will you take my note indorsed by Colonel Faxon?"

"Yes."

"And I'll indorse it too, Despard," said Captain Leathers, coming forward, and he continued:

"Yes; I'll indorse Don Chetwynd's note for any sum he asks, so don't let the fear of not getting your money prevent you from playing, as you have had it pretty much your own way in gambling the past few years."

Duke Despard's eyes flashed with anger, but he said, quietly:

"Very well, draw up your note, Chetwynd, payable on demand at any bank you wish, and let Colonel Faxon and Captain Leathers indorse it."

This was done, and then Don Chetwynd took his seat.

"Now, Mr. Despard, there is my stake, so put up yours."

"I have here the notes of Colonel Faxon and his twenty thousand in cash."

"Colonel Faxon's note to fifty thousand I accept, and the twenty thousand of course; but the other note of the colonel's for fifty thousand is not yours, as that game was not played out; so put up money in its place, while you, colonel, take this, as my money stands in its place."

And Don Chetwynd handed the last I O U to the planter.

Duke Despard saw that he was overreached, and said:

"My note of course is good, Mr. Chetwynd?"

"No, sir; but your money is."

"You refuse to take my I O U?"

"Certainly; put up your money."

"I have not that sum, as I am not a walking bank."

"How much cash have you?"

"With me and in the steamer's safe, thirty thousand."

"You wear superb rubies, Mr. Despard; put them up as security for the balance."

"You are seeking to have trouble with me, Chetwynd."

"I shall not avoid it, I admit," was the provoking reply.

"Our game first, sir; and as I never ask any man to indorse me, I'll put up my jewels."

"Put them on the table with my stakes."

With a muttered curse Duke Despard obeyed, and then the game was begun with a fresh pack of cards which Don Chetwynd had asked the barkeeper to bring.

"You would insinuate that I do not play fair," said Despard.

"I know it," came the calm rejoinder.

"The game first."

And Duke Despard took up his cards.

The silence of death fell upon all, and not a word was uttered while two games were played.

And Don Chetwynd won both.

"Colonel Faxon, here are your notes, sir, and your money," said Don Chetwynd, calmly; and fervently from the old planter's lips came:

"Thank God! I shall never forget this lesson, so help me God!"

"Amen!" was said in a low voice by Uncle Zeke, while Fidèle dared not trust herself to speak.

"One moment, Chetwynd."

"Well, sir?" and Don, who was rising, turned again to the gambler.

"Will you not allow me another game for satisfaction?"

"No, Duke Despard, I will not, for I learned to play cards, to gamble at any game, so I studied cards and gaming that I might know your tricks, and at the same time match you in square playing."

"I have gained my purpose, I have thwarted your villainy to this gentleman, and I am content; but beware that you do not force me to play one more game with you, for that shall be a game of life and death."

"And that game, Don Chetwynd, you shall some day play with me, the game of life and death," hissed the gambler.

"At any time and place you please, sir, after we reach the city," was the cool reply, and Don Chetwynd turned to walk away, when a cry of alarm arose, and wheeling quickly, he saw Duke Despard hurled to the floor, while Kit said:

"Master, he drew this pistol to shoot you, sir, and so I acted."

"My noble Kit, you have saved my life from an assassin."

"Curses upon you, Don Chetwynd, I shall hold you responsible for the deed of that black hound," cried the gambler, as he arose to his feet in a rage.

"I am responsible, sir, for the act of my slave."

"You will find me at the St. Charles Hotel, sir," and the young planter walked away, followed by Kit, who still held the gold-mounted derringer he had wrenched from the hand of the Ruby King.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FRIENDS OF OLD.

THE lesson which Colonel Faxon had received for breaking his pledge to Fidèle, not to again play cards, was a bitter one to him.

He brooded over it long after he retired to his state-room, and the next morning sought his daughter and renewed his pledge, making his vow most solemn.

At breakfast Duke Despard appeared, cynical and cool as usual, and he bowed to the colonel and Fidèle, as they came to their seats at the table.

The colonel simply inclined his head, but Fidèle paid no attention to his salute.

When Don Chetwynd came in he also bowed to Colonel Faxon, Fidèle and Miss Pæbe, but took a seat apart from them, though there was one near.

Despard, with his magnificent effrontery spoke to the young planter, with:

"Good-morning, Chetwynd, I hope you are well this morning?"

"My address in the city, sir, I gave you; if you have any communications to make, send your friend there to me," was the significant reply.

A moment after a young man came to the table and took a seat by Don Chetwynd.

He was a tall, handsome man of thirty, with a soldierly air and a face that was most attractive.

"Don Chetwynd, as I live! why, old shipmate, how are you?" he cried.

"Ben Bridewell, I am most glad to see you."

"What brings you into this part of the world?" and the hands of the two friends clasped in a warm greeting.

They had been shipmates together, and Ben Bridewell had resigned to live on a fortune left him by an aunt, he said.

"And I've half a mind to buy a plantation and try cotton-planting, or sugar raising," he added.

"Return home with me, Ben, and spend as long as you please, to see how you like the life," said Don.

"I'll do it, Don, for I am a man of elegant leisure now; but what a loss you were to the navy, and every one missed you so, for I resigned a few weeks after when the ship touched New York."

"But who is that splendid-looking fellow yonder?" and he spoke in a low tone.

"A river gambler of the blackleg kind."

"His name is Duke Despard," was the reply, and it was evident that the gambler heard of it.

"You do not seem particularly friendly toward him, Don?"

"You heard of my father's death, doubtless?"

"Yes, and wanted to write you my deepest sympathy."

"Well, he was driven to desperation by his losses at cards, and took his own life; but I look upon that man as his murderer," and Fidèle caught the low-spoken words, though no one else did.

"Who is that beautiful girl, Don?" whispered Bridewell.

"Miss Faxon, the daughter of the gentleman by her side."

"She has as lovely a face as I ever saw, though a trifle pale, and she looks sad."

After breakfast Chetwynd told his friend of all that had happened, and added:

"Now, Ben, I know of no man I would rather have serve me than you, for Despard is as anxious to kill me as I am to rid the world of him, and he will challenge me I know, for Kit's act last night."

"Count me your friend, Don, every time," was the hearty response.

As opportunity offered, Don introduced his friend to Colonel Faxon, and soon after the three went back into the ladies' cabin, where they met Fidèle, who greeted both of the young men warmly.

After a few minutes Don and Fidèle were alone, and he asked earnestly:

"Fidèle, are you not willing yet to tell me why you have driven me out of your heart?"

"I have not done so, Don, for you hold a dearer spot there this moment than ever."

"Then explain this mystery, please."

"I cannot."

"Then I must solve it my own way; but did you write to poor Ruth Ruggles?"

"Yes, and told her we were coming to the city and that she must return with us to stay as long as she will."

"You are very kind; but do you not like my friend?"

"Indeed I do, and his face shows just what he is—manly, brave and noble-hearted."

"I wish he would fall in love with Ruth."

"If he is to suffer as I do, I sincerely hope he will not."

"Now don't say that, but help me to make a match between them."

"Your sex need no aid in matters of that kind, Miss Faxon."

"Don."

"Well, Miss Faxon?"

"Do you intend to meet that desperate gambler?"

"No meeting has been arranged."

"You cannot deceive me, Don, for I know he will send you a challenge, and you will accept."

"If he sends it, yes."
 "I have thought it, I have feared it all along, and I have known that you were determined upon meeting that man; but I do thank you for saving my father from wreck—yes, and all of us."
 "I do not think he will ever touch another card."

"Nor I, and I owe it all to you."
 "Oh no, do not say that."
 "It nearly kills me to feel you have got to face that man in a duel, and yet what can I do to prevent it?"

"Nothing; if it must be, it must."
 "And you were so good to take that game off of my father's hands, though I confess I did not know you were rich, for I believed you poor, very poor, in comparison to what your inheritance should have been."

"No, I am a rich man, Miss Faxon, for, just about the time of my father's death, his bachelor brother died in California, leaving me his sole heir to nearly a million; but, for reasons of my own, I have kept the secret."

"I congratulate you most warmly, Don."
 "Thank you," he said, coldly, and then a moment after he turned to her.

"Fidèle, you know my love for you, and I meant to fix up the old home, and make it all that was beautiful to welcome you to as my wife."

"You say that you love me, Fidèle, yet refuse to be mine, and I would now tell you I can love no other woman, and when you see fit to say that you will be my wife, my heart is open to receive you; but more upon this subject, most bitter to me, I will not say, though I will solve the mystery that enshrouds your action toward me."

He walked rapidly away and sought his state-room, remaining there until the steamer arrived at New Orleans.

The moment the gang-plank was run ashore the judge and the Jew, who had not enjoyed the trip, in the seclusion of their state-rooms, shot ashore, dragging Jump after them, and quickly they disappeared in the crowd, wishing to escape the eagle eye of Don Chetwynd.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TELL-TALE LOCKET.

THE night following their arrival in the city, Don Chetwynd and Ben Bridewell sought the Golden Chance Salon, the young planter inviting his friend to see that remarkable "institution," and also have a look at the fair masked gambler.

After looking around the rooms, they approached the table where the Queen of Fortune presided, and the moment her eyes fell upon Don she arose and called him to her side.

"Pardon me, Mr. Chetwynd, if I ask you, to excuse yourself for a short while to your friend, and accompany me to my parlors."

Don was surprised beyond measure, but bowed acquiescence, and asking Bridewell to lounge about until his return, followed the mysterious lady.

She led the way to her own rooms, through the long passage that connected the *salon* on one street with her home back of it on the other.

"Do not think me bold, Mr. Chetwynd, but I have a story I wish to tell you."

"Will you listen to it?"
 "With pleasure, madam," was the ready answer.

"I owe you a deep obligation, Mr. Chetwynd, for I it was whom you saved from being kidnapped on the lake-shore."

"You?"
 "Yes, in my disguise as a Spanish lady, for, as you may have seen in coming here, my rooms front on another street."

"I need exercise, and so take it in a carriage and on horseback, vailed."

"But, Mr. Chetwynd, may I ask if you know Colonel Faxon, a planter?"

"Intimately, for his plantation adjoins mine."

"He has a family?"

"An elderly lady, a cousin, and a daughter."

"Do I look like Miss Faxon?"

She threw off her mask as she spoke, and Don Chetwynd leaped to his feet in amazement, while he cried, excitedly:

"You are her living image—face, form, hair and all."

"Please look at this locket," and Lady Lulu handed to the young planter the locket which she had demanded from Mam' Clo.

"This bears two names, Fidèle and Lurline, and both born the same date, with the names of Colonel Faxon and his wife, and their miniature likenesses," said Don, as he glanced at it eagerly.

"Yes; but did you ever hear Colonel Faxon speak of having lost a daughter?"

"Ah! now I recall it, Fidèle was one of twins, and her little sister was stolen when but half a year old, I believe, and no trace of her was ever afterward found, though diligent search was made."

"But you certainly are that one who was lost."

She smiled, and then told her story to the interested ears of Don Chetwynd.

Having concluded she said:
 "I will now send for my husband."

"Your husband?"

"Yes, Birdsall Bronson, whom you have met in the *salon*."

She called a slave and bade him tell his master to come there.

Soon after Bird Bronson came in, and introducing him to Don, she said:

"Mr. Chetwynd, my husband and myself have talked this entire matter over."

"He is a man who was born a gentleman, and went wild from various causes not necessary to state now."

"He saw me, loved me, and bought me from those who pretended to be my parents."

"Soon after he lost his money through the treachery of a friend, and took to gambling; but he had no luck, and we were destitute."

"One night I dressed myself as a man, went to the *salon*, then under other ownership, and my luck was marvelous."

"Bronson urged it, and I acquiesced, that he should buy out this place, and we did, for I continued to win constantly."

"He agreed, however, at my request, that we would give one-fourth of our winnings to charity, and we have religiously done so."

"He also agreed that I should not be known, as to my face, and might wear a mask, and I have done so."

"At first, I was indifferent to my husband, then I rather liked him, and we have lived a most platonic existence; but now I love him devotedly, for he is worthy of it, and he has promised me that to-night ends my gambling."

"He will sell out as soon as he can do so with profit, and we will go elsewhere and live, my husband leading a different life, and one that will do him honor."

"But I long to see my father, my twin sister, and I wish you to go to them, with this locket, tell them my story, and beg a place in their hearts for me, and for my husband, who has proven himself in the end, so noble."

"Will you do this for me, Mr. Chetwynd?"

"Gladly! and I know the result beforehand."

"Then bid Lady Lulu, the Queen of Fortune, good-by, for her career has ended."

"Now I am plain Lurline Bronson."

She held forth her hand, and Don grasped it warmly, and then turned to Bird Bronson, who led him back into the *salon*.

"Come, Ben, we must go," and Don Chetwynd led his friend away.

Arriving at the hotel he sent his card to Colonel Faxon, and though all were just about to retire, he was asked up to the parlors.

In a few words he told the story, from beginning to end, handed over the locket, and asked:

"Have you a welcome for her?"

"A thousand times yes," said the happy father.

"Bring her, oh! bring her to us to-night—yes, you must, you must, and her husband, too!" cried Fidèle.

To refuse was useless, so Don Chetwynd drove to the Golden Chance, and half an hour after he opened the door of Colonel Faxon's parlor, though it was midnight, and ushered into the room Lurline Bronson, while he slipped quickly away.

Going to his own room he found Ben Bridewell awaiting him, and two letters were on the table.

One was from Judge Thatcher, saying he would call in the morning, and the other was in a lady's hand.

It was as follows:

"You saved my life, at the risk of your own, and left me ere I could thank you."

"Now let me do so, and tell you that the writer is the wife of Duke Despard, a man who hates you, and who would take your life as an assassin would."

"I leave Duke Despard now forever, but I could not go from here without a word of thanks to you, and a warning for you to beware of that incarnate fiend. Gratefully,
 ESTELLE DESPARD."

Without a word Don handed the note to Bridewell, explaining the circumstances after his friend had read it.

"Here is a card, Don, and it reads:

"MR. FRED THURSTON."

"Yes, he is the friend of Duke Despard."

"He said he would call in the morning, as he came to represent a friend."

"So be it," was the cool rejoinder, and the friends retired for the night, Lurline having remained with Fidèle, the sister from whom she had been separated from their infancy.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE FATAL PISTOL.

THE next morning Mr. Fred Thurston sent his card up to Don Chetwynd's room, for the young planter had awaited in, expecting it.

"Mr. Chetwynd, we have met before, and I regret to come upon a disagreeable message," he said, politely.

"It is not disagreeable to me, Mr. Thurston, if you come from one, Duke Despard, a professional gambler."

"I do, sir, and he demands a meeting with you."

"I will grant his desire with pleasure."

"Permit me to present my friend, Mr. Bridewell, Mr. Thurston, and he will arrange all details with you."

The two seconds then conversed awhile, and Fred Thurston departed.

"I arranged for sunset to-day, on the old dueling-field you spoke of, Don."

"The weapons are to be dueling-pistols, the distance fifteen paces."

"All right, Ben; now I wish you to go with me to see Judge Thatcher, and from there I will take you to visit one of the loveliest girls I know, and of whom I spoke to you."

"Her name is Ruth Ruggles, and if you do not fall in love with her, you have no heart."

"I'm heart-whole just now, Don."

"Well, we will be off—ho, Kit."

"Yes, master," and Kit came from an adjoining room.

"Put my pistols in perfect trim, for I shall use them to-night; but be most particular with the weapon my father took his life with."

"Yes, master, I'll have them all ready, sir," and Kit worked diligently until his master returned in the afternoon.

Then the three left the hotel, Don and Bridewell entered a carriage in waiting, Kit sprung on the box with the driver, and the vehicle rolled rapidly away out of the city.

Arriving at the field of honor, they found that Despard had not yet come; but Doctor Herrick, a friend of Don Chetwynd's drove up a moment after, ready to act if his services were required.

"Don, I'll take a week's vacation if you wing that fellow, for he is dreaded as is Satan," said the doctor.

Just then up rode Duke Despard and Fred Thurston on horseback, while a carriage followed with Ogle on the box and the surgeon and the weapons inside the vehicle.

Salutes were exchanged and then the duelists took their places, Ben Bridewell placing in Don Chetwynd's hand the very weapon with which Doctor Chetwynd had taken his own life.

Bridewell had won the word, and, just as the sun touched the horizon, crisp and ringing came from his lips, amid a silence broken only by the trilling of a mocking-bird near by:

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

Don Chetwynd was wholly unmoved, and replied quickly:

"I am."

As for Duke Despard, he kept up his indifferent manner to the end, had a cigar between his lips, and wore his cynical smile, while he said, sharply:

"Yes, sir, ready!"

"Fire, one!"

Both pistols flashed, but one a second before the other.

It was Don Chetwynd's quicker touch on the trigger that saved his life, for Duke Despard's death-clutch on his weapon fired it, as a bullet had pierced his brain directly between his eyes, while the ball from his pistol cut through the crown of the soft hat worn by his adversary.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE EXPECTED GUEST.

THAT Fidèle might know nothing in regard to the duel, Don Chetwynd had appeared as though there had been no challenge sent, and the maiden was in hopes that it might blow over.

Then too, she was so taken up with her new-found sister, that she occupied her thoughts, and they were both planning for the future.

Lurline, for she seemed anxious to drop the name of Lulu, under which she had been the Lady of Luck, had sent word to her husband that she would remain all night at the hotel, and that her father and sister intended returning with her the next morning.

Bird Bronson was a trifle nervous as the time drew near for their appearance, but met them in the parlors, for Lurline had driven to her own house in the street back of the thoroughfare on which the Golden Chance was situated.

Going up to Bronson in her quiet way she kissed him and said:

"Good-morning, Bird; I ran off last night from you, but I know you will forgive me, when I found a loving father and sister by so doing."

"Come, let me introduce you now to my father as my husband, though he has known you as the proprietor of the Golden Chance for a year or more."

"Sister Fidèle, this is my husband, Birdsall Bronson, a man who loved me enough to buy me of my supposed parents, and who, by his noble traits and devotion to me, has taught me to love him."

The colonel greeted Bronson most warmly, and Fidèle also received him most kindly.

They then looked over the elegant home of Fortune's Queen, and Fidèle expressing a natural curiosity to see the Golden Chance Salon they were shown through it, for the place was as dismal as a graveyard by day, and in fact was kept closed until afternoon.

It was then decided that Lurline should return home with her father and sister, while her husband should sell out the Golden Chance and

place his money in some other business, and when this was agreed upon Fidèle said:

"And poor Ruth Ruggles returns with me, too, Lurline, and we can make her forget her sorrows, for we will be so happy, while Mr. Benjamin Bridewell will aid us in that respect, as he visits Mr. Chetwynd for a month, and we must make him fall in love with her, for she will like him, I know."

"Then there will be Don Chetwynd, and we can all have such jolly times, for—"

She stopped suddenly, for there flashed across her heart the shadow of her secret marriage, and that perhaps death might stalk in to break up their pleasant plans, as the dread of the duel rose before her.

Back to the hotel went Fidèle and her father, leaving Lurline to pack up and send her trunks to the steamer that left two days later, for they could not catch that evening's boat.

Arriving at the hotel Fidèle had hoped to find Don Chetwynd there, but the inquiries of Colonel Faxon elicited the information that he had gone off somewhere with Mr. Bridewell.

"Oh, father! can it be that there will be a duel between Don and that fearful man, Despard?" asked Fidèle anxiously.

"Egad, if there is, you should be glad, my child," was the ready answer.

"Why, papa, what can you mean?" she asked in a hurt way.

"You will be widowed, Fidèle."

"Father!"

"Fact, for, though Duke Despard has always killed his man, when he stands up before Don Chetwynd, he will find that he has met more than his match."

"You speak so indifferently of what will be an affair of life and death, father."

"My child, ever since Don Chetwynd returned I have felt that he meant to avenge his father."

"He has carried a Haunted Heritage in his heart and brain, an inheritance haunted by his father's suicidal act, and he has looked upon Duke Despard as his murderer."

"They were shipmates in the navy, and Chetwynd, I believe, gave him a severe punishment once; then he considered that the gambler avenged himself by ruining Doctor Chetwynd."

"So it goes, and Don has determined to bring him to an accounting."

"He has studied the playing of cards, he has played all gambling games in a most systematic manner, and all that he might some day come face to face with Duke Despard under circumstances that would force trouble, or cause the gambler to show the white feather."

"Despard knows that Don Chetwynd is a man of marvelous nerve and utterly fearless; he is aware that he was the best swordsman in the navy, has a wonderful endurance, and as a shot has no superior, or he alone as an equal, so he is careful not to have a difficulty with him."

"Now you know why I speak so indifferently about it, for I do not believe Despard will force trouble with Chetwynd, who seeks rather than shuns it with him, and if it does come, my word for it the gambler goes under."

"But the thought is terrible, father."

"True, yet dueling is winked at here, if not allowed, and there is but one way out of an insult under such circumstances; but now what is your sweet will, Fidèle?"

"I am going shopping with Aunt Phoebe, and then we will dine with Ruth Ruggles, for you are to meet us there, you know."

"I'll be there on time; but was not Chetwynd and Bridewell invited also?"

"Yes, papa, they were to join us there, for Ruth invited our party, you know, when I told her they were here, and Don is to take Mr. Bridewell there this morning to call, but accepted the invitation," and soon after Fidèle and Aunt Phoebe, as she called her cousin, went out on a shopping excursion, while Colonel Faxon sauntered forth to attend to some business matters.

The day passed away, and the candles were lighted in the handsome home of Ruth Ruggles, but some of her guests were tardy.

In a well-fitting black dress, with a sweeping train, Ruth looked very beautiful, though she was pale.

Fidèle was also looking most lovely, though her face wore an anxious look, and Miss Phoebe was resplendent in a new dress.

Setting aside all ceremony, Ruth, who had heard the story of Lurline's strange life, but which was to be kept from all else, had at once suggested that they drive over for her and her husband, and fetch them.

This was done, and Bird Bronson was happy in the thought that his career had not been placed against him, and gladly accepted with his wife.

So they were all assembled in the grand parlors, awaiting the coming of the two tardy guests.

"Sing something, my child," said the colonel, "so that we will not get impatient, while we are listening to your sweet voice."

"Thank you, papa; but what shall I sing?"

Miss Phoebe always had something to say at the wrong time, and was certain to make a mistake if she could, so she said:

"Yes, Fidèle, sing my favorite, 'The Long, Long, Weary Day.'"

Whether it chimed in with Fidèle's feelings or not, by a strange impulse she took up the guitar and running her fingers over the strings a few times, acquiesced in Miss Phoebe's request.

When she reached the words:

"His face I ne'er shall see,
And naught is left for me
But utter weeping,
My love-watch keeping,"

a carriage rolled rapidly up under the *porte cochère*, and Colonel Faxon, who was at the window, said in a half-frightened tone:

"Bridewell has come, and is alone!"

A moan from Fidèle and the guitar fell from her nerveless hands, while her form sunk back in the soft cushions of the chair upon which she was seated.

Ruth, whose eyes were filled with tears, at the sad memories of her brother, which the words brought up, forgot her own wounds and sprang to the side of her friend, while Bird Bronson, who had heard of the intended duel from Colonel Faxon, sprang quickly to the door, the planter following him.

"Well, Bridewell, you are alone—has anything happened to Don?" cried the colonel anxiously.

"He has gone to his plantation, Colonel Faxon, leaving on the Natchez fifteen minutes ago, catching her at Carrollton," was the reply.

"Has aught happened—has there been a duel?" whispered the colonel; but he gave no answer, as he beheld Lurline in the doorway and mistaking her for Fidèle bowed low.

"My daughter, Mrs. Bronson, Mr. Bridewell," said the colonel, and the young man seemed mystified, for Don Chetwynd had told him nothing of Lurline's history.

"It is my daughter Fidèle's twin sister, Mr. Bridewell—ah! here is Fidèle," and the latter, with an effort arose from her chair.

Advancing quickly, Bridewell bowed low to Ruth and said:

"Miss Ruggles, I am sorry to come alone, but Mr. Chetwynd left on the Natchez for his plantation, so asked me to make his excuses for him, and hoped that he would soon be able to apologize in person to you at The Retreat."

"Good-evening, Miss Faxon," and the young man turned to Fidèle, who was watching his face most attentively.

"Mr. Bridewell," she said slowly, taking his hand and speaking with deep feeling.

"Mr. Bridewell, why did Mr. Chetwynd leave so suddenly?"

"He deemed it necessary to do so, Miss Faxon, so caught the steamer at Carrollton."

"Answer me, please."

"Was there a duel?"

Ben Bridewell's face flushed, and he looked appealingly toward Bird Bronson and the colonel, the latter saying:

"Out with it, Bridewell, for the papers will be full of it in the morning."

"Miss Faxon, there was a duel."

"Between Don Chetwynd and that gambler, Duke Despard?"

"Yes, Miss Faxon."

A deathlike silence was upon all, broken by Fidèle's question:

"The result?"

"Don was unhurt, though a bullet passed through his hat—he shot Despard through the brain."

"I told you so," broke from Colonel Faxon's lips.

"At last!" muttered Bird Bronson.

"Thank God, now I am free," said Fidèle presently, while scarcely audible were the words of Ruth Ruggles:

"My poor brother is avenged."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CONCLUSION.

SOME days after the scene just described, a large Mississippi steamer ran into the landing of The Retreat Plantation, and a large party went ashore.

There was Colonel Faxon, Miss Phoebe, Fidèle, Bird Bronson and his wife, and Ben Bridewell.

Carriages awaited them upon the shore, and in a stylish victoria sat Don Chetwynd, who had driven there to meet his friend and guest, Ben Bridewell.

He looked pale and stern, but greeted Bridewell most warmly, and then received hearty hand-grasps from all the others of the party.

"You are to have supper with us, you and Bridewell, Don, so come home with us," said the colonel.

"Yes, please come," said Fidèle.

"Bridewell, you drive Ruth home in my buggy, and I'll go in the carriage with Bronson, Lurline and Cousin Phoebe, and you, Don, can bring Fidèle," said the colonel, arranging all most satisfactorily.

As the carriages rolled away Fidèle turned to Don and said in a low tone:

"Don, you said you intended solving the mystery of why I sent you from me, yet confessed that I loved you?"

"Yes, Fidèle."

"Pardon me for touching upon a subject that cannot but be painful to you; but you solved the mystery when you ushered the soul of that wicked man into eternity, for that act freed me from hateful bonds to him."

"Don, that man held my father in his power, he used that power to force me into a marriage with him."

"To save poor father I married him, upon condition that he would not claim me for one year."

"I sacrificed myself; but thank God I am free."

Don Chetwynd listened in silence, his face livid.

Then he said:

"Fidèle, I am glad to know that the marriage was such as it was, for that man had a wife living, as I can prove to you, and hence the ceremony with you was illegal."

"It is a sad thing to take human life, but in my heart now I can feel no regret, for he deserved his fate."

"Now tell me, Fidèle, if that man was all that stood between us?"

"All, Don."

"Now I can be happy, Fidèle," was the low reply, and one year after he was made still happier by claiming Fidèle as his wife, while at the same time Ruth Ruggles, burying her love for Don Chetwynd as her own secret, was made Mrs. Benjamin Bridewell.

Miss Phoebe looked sad at the wedding, for it suited her romantic fancy to feel that she mourned a lost love.

She said that she had loved an ideal, though the reality of that ideal was rapidly degenerating into vagabondism, for I refer to Judge Jeremiah Joslyn, who, played out as a dead beat at home, was thinking of starting upon the road as a "tramp of the old school."

As for Jacob Judah, he found that the judge had already sold Jump to some one else, but he dared not prosecute him, as he was forced to leave the city on account of his own questionable transactions, and seek other scenes where he was unknown.

While on their wedding-tour, which extended into Mexico, Don Chetwynd and Ben Bridewell and their wives visited an old monastery, where it was said an aged priest and young nun were wont to extend charity to all deserving ones, and had done so much good in the world that they were looked upon as saints.

To his surprise Don recognized in the nun Estelle Enders.

She started at sight of him, then greeted him warmly, and told him that the vast property of the Ruby King had come to her, as his wife, and she and her father, to whom she introduced the young planter, were devoting it to charity.

Idlerest was made like a new house to welcome its master's bride, and Kit was made the overseer of the plantation, marrying Trip, Fidèle's maid, while Uncle Zeke performed the ceremony.

Fred Thurston was forced to fly from the city, having been guilty of forgery, while Jan and Mam' Clo still dwell in the old cabin on the shore, hiding from mankind, and yet living luxuriously, as far as catering to their taste as gourmands is concerned.

To-day slavery is no longer known in the South, and the Civil War broke up the old-time plantation life, but the memory of the "days of old lang syne" can never be erased from the memories of those who have been the heroes and heroines of my story.

And Lurline, she that was the Queen of Fortune?

Her husband bought a plantation on the river, and happy in his home-life, no one except the "chosen few" ever knew his wife as she once lived, the Lady of Luck.

THE END.

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